

Beware the Cat

Adapted from William Baldwin by Frances Babbage, Terry O'Connor and Rachel Stenner

Introduction

Frances Babbage and Terry O'Connor

On the Origins and Spirit of the Show

This adaptation of William Baldwin's sixteenth-century novel *Beware the Cat* was first performed at the Spiegeltent, Sheffield, on September 22nd 2018, as part of the University of Sheffield's Festival of the Mind. The performance was subsequently revived in 2019 and played at ACCA (Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts, Brighton), The Other Place (the RSC, Stratford-Upon-Avon) and the Workshop Theatre, University of Leeds. The adaptation brought *Beware the Cat* to the stage for the first time. As authors, we aimed to create a performance of Baldwin's work that would retain the form and particularities of its original language; rather than seeking to dramatize it fully, we chose to foreground the act of reading and reproduce the novel's invitation to listen and imagine. We joined with Sheffield-based artist Penny McCarthy, who contributed more than a hundred hand-drawn images that were projected throughout the performance: these drawings supported and sometimes playfully strayed from Baldwin's scenes, conversing and colliding with the spoken text.

On the Performance Space

The four performers, formally dressed but not in costume, sit facing the audience from behind long tables on which are their play scripts, heaps of drawings, a water jug and glasses. Behind them is a projection screen. The set up of the space suggests something like a conference panel or political debate, but with that formality undercut both by the music playing as the audience arrive and by ushers wearing bonnets with ears (the Cats), who distribute programmes. On one end of the line of tables is a visualiser: performers take turns to sit by this and oversee the projection of drawings onto the screen. At the other end of the tables is a large stack of what are later revealed to be long, thin, cardboard signs: these are held up by Speaker 2/'G.B.' (the latter, Baldwin's editorial persona) at points throughout the performance, each sign displaying one of the original text's marginal notes.

In *Beware the Cat*'s premiere at the Spiegeltent, the audience sat cabaret-style at small tables or in booths. This layout could not be adopted for all venues but the seating arrangement remained as informal and relaxed as possible, making it easier for the Cats to move amongst the audience in the interval when offering refreshments.

On Music

Incidental music played as the audience came in, during the interval and at the end of the performance. The music was by the twentieth-century composer Henry Mancini, playful pieces aptly titled around cats: 'The Dancing Cat', 'The One-Eyed Cat', 'Cat and Mouse' and 'The Cat'. *Beware the Cat*'s first performance took place in a Spiegeltent: the slinky, lightly ironic and upbeat tone of Mancini's work felt appropriately sociable for that informal space, with the references to and musical evocation of cats an added pleasure. The incidental music was retained for later performances in different venues, since by that point it had become integral to the aim of setting a lively, convivial atmosphere.

The song that was performed a cappella at the beginning of each section was based around the melody from Jake Thackray's 'The Black Swan', a drinking song of sorts, coupled with new lyrics written by O'Connor. This choice, too, was initially a response to the sociability of the Spiegeltent: we judged that breaking the spoken text with song would make an arresting start, simultaneously shifting mood and tone of the environment from that of gathering audience to focused listening. As with the Mancini, the singing and the song quickly became fundamental to the whole and remained, creating moments of performative vulnerability and variation in the oral register.

On the Text

The script published here is laid out in a manner that seeks to convey not just the dialogue but the multi-layered and self-referential mode of the play in performance. The left-hand column presents the spoken (and sung) text; **lines in bold** were spoken in unison. The right-hand column contains annotations by Babbage and O'Connor that attempt to illuminate performance action or expose the creative process behind it; this column also includes a (very small) selection of McCarthy's drawings in miniature, illustrating the way in which the visual language of the piece imagined Baldwin's world. Finally, the uppercase text in boxes (beginning with "A WISE MAN MAY IN SOME THINGS CHANGE HIS OPINION") shows how the cardboard signs reproducing Baldwin's marginalia were incorporated during the performance, their shape on the page echoing the form of the signs themselves. The script as presented thus aims to reveal and mimic the combination and collision of media in performance as well as the sly humour and pretended pedantry of Baldwin's satirical work.

The script was co-authored by Babbage, O'Connor and Stenner and is based on an unpublished version of Baldwin's novel by Cathy Shrank. Credit also goes to McCarthy and the cast, all of whom influenced the final edit of the text for performance.

Cast and creatives for the original production were as follows:

SPEAKER 1, MOUSE-SLAYER	Frances Babbage
SPEAKER 2, Baldwin*	Bob McKay
SPEAKER 3, MASTER STREAMER	Bill McDonnell**
SPEAKER 4, CHURL, LADY GRISARD, DAME	Robyn Orfitelli
CATS	Zelda Hannay, Lindsay Mannion, Marty Richardson***

Other parts were played by members of the company.

* In the novel, William Baldwin adopts an editorial persona identified as 'G.B.' (since the author was sometimes called Gulielmus Baldwin). In the play script, we identify the speaker simply as 'Baldwin'.

** In 2019 this role was played by Adam Piette.

*** Cats were typically recruited locally for each performance and have included Hayden Coward, Sam Hardy, Václav Kyllar, Nathan Manna, Céline Nyssens, Panna Paskuj and Jemima Wells.

Director Terry O'Connor

Producer Rachel Stenner

Artist Penny McCarthy

Stage Management Ellie Pickersgill

SPEAKER 4: [Song:¹]

Welcome you persons
You old ones and young ones
Those who drink, those who prefer to think
Those who do both, welcome all

This is a tale from some 500 years back
A tale of tales about cats and their ways
A story of cats who can talk

Come hear these merry tales
These scary tales
These magic tales
Come hear how cats can scrap, cats can fight
Cats can scrat and bite
Hear how cats organise, socialise, problematize
Come sit and listen hard to Beware the Cat
Welcome all, welcome all, welcome all to Beware the Cat

SPEAKER 1: The Argument of the Matter²

SPEAKER 1: OK everybody, I think we're ready to start. As Rachel said, the tale is going to pass from one voice to another. It starts with its author, William Baldwin – Bob, that's you. Begin when you're ready.

BALDWIN: It chanced that at Christmas last I was at Court with Master Ferrers, then master of the King's majesty's pastimes, in which time among many other exercises among ourselves we used nightly at our lodging to talk of sundry things. It pleased Master Ferrers to make me his bedfellow, and upon a pallet cast upon the rushes in his own chamber to lodge Master Willot and Master Streamer, the one his astronomer, the other his divine. And among many other things too long to rehearse, it happened on a night (which I think was the twenty-eight of December), there fell a controversy between Master Streamer the effect whereof was **whether birds and beasts had reason.**³ The occasion thereof was this: I had heard that the King's Players were learning a play wherein the most part of the actors were birds, the device whereof I discommended, saying it was not comical to make either speechless things to speak or brutish things to common reasonably. Master Streamer, my lord's divine, being more divine in this point than I was ware of held the contrary part, affirming that

STREAMER: beasts and fowls have reason, and that as much as men, yea, and in some points more.

1. The first verse was a solo by Orfitelli, the second by the two men, and the final verse by the two women: the shift of voice between Parts 2 and 3 marked the move from the male-dominated human world to the female-led world of cats. It was sung a capella, making an unexpected beginning to the performance given the formal set-up of the long table, chairs and papers.

2. This prototypical novel adopts some of the forms of classical oratory: here a summary of the argument 'whether birds and beasts [have] reason' leads the proceedings. The congregational address works well in performance, making it possible to frame the audience as the persons deliberating on the argument.

3. Lines in bold were spoken by all performers in unison.

BALDWIN: Master Ferrers himself and his astronomer harkened to us, but would take part on neither side. When Master Streamer had for proof of his assertion declared many things – of:

SPEAKER 3: elephants that walked upon cords, hedgehogs that knew always what weather would come,

SPEAKER 4: foxes and dogs that, after they had been all night abroad killing geese and sheep, would come home in the morning and put their necks into their collars, parrots that bewailed their keeper's death,

BALDWIN: and an hundred things more - I denied these to come of reason but to be but **natural kindly actions**.

STREAMER: Well

BALDWIN: quoth Master Streamer,

STREAMER: I know what I know⁴, and I speak not only what by hearsay of some philosophers I know, but what I myself have proved.

4. Streamer's complacent approach to knowledge is subtly satirised here: such moments typically drew laughter and the line stood out as sounding strangely contemporary.

BALDWIN: Why?, quoth I then, Have you proof of beasts' and fowls' reason?

STREAMER: Yea

BALDWIN: quoth he

STREAMER: I have heard them and understand them both speak and reason as well as I hear and understand you.

BALDWIN: At this Mr. Ferrers laughed, but I thought there might be somewhat more than I did know, wherefore I asked him what beasts or fowls he had heard, and where and when. At this he paused a while and at last said,

STREAMER: If that I thought you could be content to hear me and, **without any interruption**⁵ till I have done, to mark what I say, I would tell you such a story of one piece of mine own experimenting as should both make you wonder and put you out of doubt concerning this matter; but this I promise you afore: if I do tell it that, **as soon as any man curiously interrupteth**, I will leave off and not speak one word more.

5. Lines that reflexively address the act of listening were also said in unison.

BALDWIN: When we had promised quietly to hear, he turning himself so in his bed as we might best hear him, said as followeth:

SPEAKER 1: The first part of Master Streamer's oration⁶

STREAMER: I was lodged at a friend's house of mine – a printer, Master John Day - in a chamber hard by the printing house, which had a fair bay window opening in the garden. At the other end of the printing house, as you enter in, is a side door and three or four steps, which go up to the leads of the gate, where sometime - a loathly and abominable sight - quarters of men do stand up upon poles. On a time I was sitting by the fire with certain of the house, I told what a noise and wauling the cats had made there in the leads the night before from ten o' clock till one, so that neither I could sleep nor study for them. And by means of this introduction we fell in communication of **cats**.⁷ And some affirming as I do now (but I was against it then) **that they had understanding**⁸, for confirmation whereof one of the servants told this story:

A WISE MAN MAY IN SOME THINGS CHANGE HIS OPINION.

SPEAKER 4: there was in my country

STREAMER: quoth he

SPEAKER 4: a man (the fellow was born in Staffordshire) that had a young cat which he had brought up of a kittling and would nightly dally and play with it. And on a time as he rode through Sherwood about certain business, a cat leaped out of a bush before him and called him twice or thrice by his name, but because he made no answer nor spake (for he was so afraid that he could not) she spake to him plainly twice or thrice these words following:

SPEAKER 1: Commend me unto Titton Tatton and to Puss thy catton, and tell her that Grimmalkin⁹ is dead.

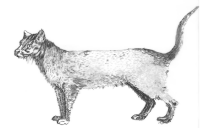
SPEAKER 4: This done she went her way, and the man went forward about his business. And after that he was returned home, in an evening sitting by the fire with his wife he told of his adventure in the wood and, when he had told her all of the cat's message, his cat, which had harkened unto the tale, looked upon him sadly and at the last said,

SPEAKER 1: And is Grimmalkin dead? then farewell, Dame,

A WONDERFUL WIT OF A CAT.

6. The division of the text into parts echoes Baldwin's original but also served a pragmatic purpose, breaking up the task of storytelling for performers and inserting brief intervals for the listening audience.

7. The displaying of images started on this line. From this point, whoever sat at the overhead projector would choose and replace images for projection, connecting image and narrative atmospherically rather than through direct illustration. In this way, the production summoned a whole 'cat world' and allowed a slippage between verbal and visual representation, as if these were two narratives that wove through the piece, sometimes overlapping and sometimes pulling apart.



8. The heart of the story.



9. Grimmalkin is an archaic term for cat, especially a she-cat, becoming a proper name in early literature by Baldwin, Shakespeare and others.

SPEAKER 4: and therewith went her way and was never seen after.

STREAMER: When this tale was done, another of the company, which had been in Ireland¹⁰, asked this fellow when this thing which he had told happened; he answered that he could not tell well, howbeit as he conjectured not past 40 years.

10. Baldwin does not hesitate to denigrate the Irish.

SPEAKER 2: Sure,

STREAMER: quoth the other,

SPEAKER 2: then it may well be, for about the same time, as I heard, a like thing happened in Ireland where, if I conjecture not amiss, Grimmalkin of whom you spake was slain.

STREAMER: Yea, sir, quoth I, I pray you, how so?

SPEAKER 2: I will tell you, Master Streamer

STREAMER: (quoth he),

SPEAKER 2: that which was told me in Ireland and which I have, till now, so little credited that I was ashamed to report it; but hearing that I hear now, I do so little misdoubt it that I think I never told, nor you ever heard, a more likely tale.



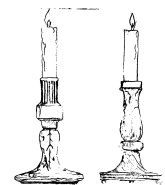
While I was in Ireland in the time that Mac Morrrough and all the rest of the wild lords were the King's enemies. In this time, I say, as I was on a night eating with one of Fitz Harris' churls, we fell in talk as we have done now of **strange adventures and cats**, and there among other things the churl said: ¹¹

11. The novel is divided into parts, in accordance with oratorical form.

Part One is a presentation of different opinions: it made for a fast opening exchange between the four performers, with a number of shorter stories to settle the audience into active listening.

A CHURL'S TALE.

CHURL: There was, not seven years past, a kern called Patrick Apore, who got him with his boy into his country and in the night time entered into a town of two houses and slew the people and then took such cattle as they found, which was a cow and a sheep, and departed therewith homeward; but doubting they should be pursued, he got him into a church, thinking to lurk there till midnight was past, for there he was sure that no man would suspect or seek him (for the wild Irishmen had churches in such reverence) and while this kern was in the church he thought it best to dine, for he had eaten little that day; he made a fire in the



church and killed the sheep and, after the Irish fashion, laid it thereupon and roasted it, but when it was ready and that he thought to eat it there came in a cat and set her by him and said in Irish,

SPEAKER 1: Shane foel,

CHURL: which means.....?

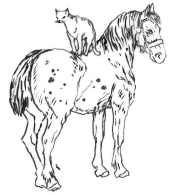
SPEAKER 1: Give me some meat.

CHURL: He, amazed at this, gave her the quarter that was in his hand, which immediately she did eat up and asked more till she had consumed all the sheep and, like a cormorant not satisfied therewith, asked still for more, wherefore **they supposed it were the devil**, and therefore thinking it wisdom to please him, killed the cow which they had stolen, and gave the cat a quarter, which she immediately devoured; then they gave her two other quarters.



A CAT DID EAT A SHEEP.

By this time the cat had eaten three quarters and called for more, and, doubting that she would eat them too because they had no more for her, they got them out of the church and away rode as fast as they could hie. When he was a mile or two from the church, the moon began to shine, and his boy espied the cat upon his master's horse behind him and told him; whereupon the kern took his dart and flung it and struck her through with it; but immediately there came **such a sight of cats** that, after long fight with them, his boy was killed and eaten up, and he himself, as good and as swift as his horse was, had much to do to scape.



CATS DID KILL AND EAT A MAN.

When he was come home all weary and hungry he set him down by his wife and told her his adventure, which, when a kittling which his wife kept scarce half a year had heard, up she started and said,

SPEAKER 1: Hast thou killed Grimmalkin?

CHURL: and therewith she plunged in his face and with her teeth took him by the throat and, ere that she could be taken away, she had strangled him. Whereupon I gather that this Grimmalkin was it which the cat in Sherwood sent news of unto the cat which we heard of even now.

SPEAKER 2: Tush,

STREAMER: quoth another that sat by,

SPEAKER 2: your conjecture is too unreasonable; for to admit that cats have reason, and that they do in their own language understand one another, yet how should a cat in Sherwood know what is done in Ireland?

CHURL: How?

STREAMER: quoth he,

CHURL: Even as we know what is done in the realms of France, Flanders and Spain. There be few ships but have cats belonging unto them, which bring news unto their fellows out of all quarters.¹²



12. The cat world, their networks, morality, laws and cares are presented throughout as mysteriously equal or superior to the world of humans.

CATS CARRY NEWS.

SPEAKER 2: Yea,

STREAMER: quoth the other,

SPEAKER 2: But why should **all cats love to hear of Grimmalkin**? Or how should Grimmalkin eat so much meat as you speak of? Or why should **all cats so labour to revenge her death**?

CHURL: Nay, that passeth my cunning

STREAMER: quoth he

CHURL: to show in all; howbeit, in part conjectures may be made, as thus: it may be that Grimmalkin and her line is as much esteemed and hath the same dignity among cats as the master-bee hath among the whole hive, at whose commandment all bees are obedient, or as the pope hath had ere this over all Christendom, in whose cause all his clergy would not only scrat and bite, but kill and burn to powder (though they know not why).

STREAMER: Nay, said I then, I marvel how Grimmalkin, as you term her, if she were no bigger could eat so much meat at once.

CHURL: I do not think

STREAMER: (quoth he that told the tale)



CHURL: that she did eat all, although she asked all, but took her choice and left the rest by, as we see in the feeding of many things.

CAT WILL GO TO KIND.

Now, that **love and fellowship and a desire to save their kind is among cats**, I know by experience, for there was one that hired a friend of mine in pastime to roast a cat alive and turned a spit whereupon was a quick cat, but ere he had turned a while – whether it was the smell of the cat’s wool that singed, or else her cry that called them, I cannot tell – but **there came such a sort of cats** that, I and other hardy men were well scrat for our labour.



SPEAKER 2: Indeed,

STREAMER: quoth a well-learned man and one of excellent judgement that was then in the company,

SPEAKER 2: It doth appear that there is in cats, as in all other kinds of beasts, **a certain reason and language whereby they understand one another**. But as touching this, Grimmalkin I take rather to be an hagat or a witch than a cat, for witches have gone often in that likeness.

STREAMER: By my faith, sir, this is strange (quod I myself) **that a witch should take on her a cat’s body**;¹³ that a woman, being so large a body, should strain her into the body of a cat or into that form either, I have not much heard of, nor can well perceive how it may be, which maketh me, I promise you, believe it the less.



SPEAKER 2: Well, Master Streamer

STREAMER: (quoth he),

SPEAKER 2: I know you are not so ignorant herein as you make yourself, but this is your accustomed fashion always to make men believe that you be not so well-learned as you be.

WISE MEN DISSEMBLE THEIR CUNNING.

For although witches may take upon them cats’ bodies, or alter the shape of their or other bodies, yet this is not done by putting their own bodies thereinto but either by bringing their souls for the time out of their bodies and putting them in the other, or by deluding the sight and fantasies of the seers. So that to conclude

13. Owing to the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist, the idea of transubstantiation was widespread.

as I began: I think that the cat which you call Grimmalkin, was a **witch in a cat's likeness** and, that for the wit and craft of her, **other natural cats that were not so wise** have had her and her race in reverence among them, thinking her to be but a mere cat as they themselves were, like as we silly fools long time for his sly and crafty juggling revered the pope, thinking him to have been but a man whereas indeed he was a **very incarnated devil**¹⁴, like as this Grimmalkin was an incarnate witch.

STREAMER: Why then, sir (said I), do you think that natural cats have wit and that they understand one another?

SPEAKER 2: What else, Master Streamer?

STREAMER: (quod he)

ALL SENSIBLE CREATURES HAVE REASON AND UNDERSTANDING.

SPEAKER 2: There is no kind of sensible creatures but have reason and understanding whereby (in their kind) each understandeth other and do therein some points so **excel the dull, beastly, brutish ignorance of diverse men.**

SOME BEASTS ARE WISER THAN MEN.

STREAMER: When this tale was ended the clock struck nine, whereupon old Thomas took his leave and departed; the rest of the company gat them also either to their business or to their beds.

MASTER STREAMER IS ALWAYS MUCH GIVEN TO STUDY.

And I went straight to my chamber but the remembrance of this former talk so troubled me that I could think of nothing else, but mused still and, as it were, examined more narrowly that every man had spoken.¹⁵

Musical interlude.

SPEAKERS 2 and 3: [Song]

Listen with care here
Take notes if you dare hear
As now is told in a manner quite bold
The secrets of Streamer's next step

Hear of a potion, a strange sort of notion
Of hedgehogs and frogs, mixed with good London fog

14. Here and recurrently the text makes Catholicism a target. Many anti-Catholic satires appeared during Edward VI's Protestant reign; Terence Bowers argues that *Beware the Cat* is an especially sophisticated example, not just ridiculing the Church of Rome's practices but hinting at fundamental problems in its epistemology. Bowers, 'The Production and Communication of Knowledge in William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat: Toward a Typographic Culture*', *Criticism* 33: 1 (1991), 1-29 (3).



15. The end of the first part closes here with a classic storytelling trope as Streamer describes going to bed, able to think of nothing else but the words just heard and the tantalising possibility of accessing the language of the creaturely realm. A Baldwin cliffhanger...

A potion to open the mind
Come hear these merry tales
These scary tales
These magic tales
Come hear how cats can scrap, cats can fight
Cats can scrat and bite
Hear how cats organise, socialise, problematize
Come sit and listen hard to Beware the Cat
Listen all, listen now, listen hard to Beware the Cat

SPEAKER 1: The second part of Master Streamer's oration¹⁶

STREAMER: Ere I had been long in this contemplation, the cats assembled again in the leads. Just like the night before, one sung in one tune, another in another; they observed no musical chords: but I lie, for one cat, groaning as a bear throwled out so low and loud a base that, together with another cat which, crying like a young child, squealed out the shrieking treble, it might be well counted a harmony.

CATS HAVE SUNDRY VOICES.

To understand the cause of their assembly and by their gestures perceive their meaning, I went softly into a chamber which hath a window into the same leads and, in the dark standing closely, I viewed through the trellis as well as I could all their gestures and behaviour. And I promise you it was a thing worth the marking. For one cat, a mighty big one, grey-haired and bristle-bearded, sat in the midst, and on either side of her sat another, and before her stood three more, whereof one mewed continually, save when the great cat groaned, and when the great cat had done, this mewing cat began again, as if it were making 'beisance to them which sat.

CATS KEEP ORDER AMONG THEMSELVES.

And oftentimes, in the midst of this cat's mewing, all the rest would suddenly bray forth and hush again, as if laughing at that which they heard the other cat declare. I beheld them from ten till it was twelve o'clock, then sat on my bed and devised upon the doings of these cats, casting all manner of ways thereof to know what they meant. And by and by I deemed that the grey cat which sat in the midst was the chief and sat as a judge among the

16. Part 2 is structured very differently from the preceding section, for performers and audience alike. Streamer's voice dominates now, as he sets out in painstaking detail the process of making and taking his 'philtre'. In performance, the actor handled these large blocks of text by speeding up delivery, undermining the supposed precision of Streamer's method – seemingly essential for the concoction's efficacy – with its frenzied expression.



rest, and that the cat which continually mewed declared some matter or made account to her of somewhat.



I was caught with **such a desire** to know what they had said that I could not sleep all that night, but lay devising by what means I might learn to understand them.

A PHILOSOPHER SEARCHETH THE NATURE OF ALL THINGS.

And calling to mind that I had read in Albertus Magnus' work a way to understand birds' voices I sought in my library for the book and greedily read it. And when I had thoroughly marked his description of a potion, I devised thereby to make a **philtre** for my purpose. Up I rose and got me abroad to seek for such things as might serve my earnest business and, because you be all my friends, I will hide nothing from you, but declare from point to point how I behaved in making and taking of my philtre.¹⁷

17. The recipe is long and complex, grotesque and surreal. Here it is cut it down considerably from the original but intentionally retains its verbosity and fussiness, perhaps anticipating the modern cookery show.

ALBERTUS MAGNUS TEACHETH MANY WONDERS.

The first ingredient among many I needed was an hedgehog. I got me forth toward St. John's Wood where not two days before I had seen one. Indeed under a hedge I found an hedgehog soon after a hare and a fox which I killed all straight with my knife, saying, "**Shavol swashmeth, gorgona liscud**"¹⁸, and hung them at my girdle and came homeward as fast as I could. But when I came in the close commonly called St John's Field, a kite spied at my back the fox, and, thinking to have had a morsel, strake at it, and before he could loose his claw I drew out my knife and killed him, saying "**Javol sheleg hutotheca Jiscud**", and brought him home with the rest.

18. These are nonsense words, with no meaning other than their sound. That they appear at all reflects the the belief that a spell becomes effective when vocalised: indeed, Baldwin's marginal gloss observes at this point that 'if a man when he prepareth any medicine tell aloud why he maketh it, it will be of more force'.

I flayed my hedgehog, the flesh I washed clean and put in a pot and – with white wine, rosemary, neat's tongue, four parts of the first and two of the second – I made a broth and boiled it. I took the fox's heart and lights, the hare's brain, the kite's maw, and the hedgehog's kidneys. All these I beat and made a cake of and baked till it was dry like bread. And while this was a-baking, I took three parts of the fox's grease and as much of the brain; the like portion of the hedgehog's grease and brain, with his stones; all the kite's brain, her upper beak and middle claw of her left foot; the fat of the hare's kidneys, and the juice of his right shoulder bone. All these I pounded in a mortar, then I put it in a cloth and hung it over a basin, out of which dropped, **3 hours later**¹⁹, about half a pint of oil very fair and clear.



19. Time is strongly marked in this part of the story and underlined in performance by unison speech. The narrative's periodically chiming bells make the movement of time dreamlike and hallucinatory.

THERE BE MANY STRANGE HUMOURS IN MANY MEN'S HEADS.

At **twelve o'clock**, I went to dinner, and meat I ate none save the boiled hedgehog. My bread was the cake mentioned afore, my drink a distillation of hedgehog broth, which was exceeding strong and pleasant both in taste and savour. After that, my head waxed so heavy that I could not choose but sleep, yet waked again **within an hour**. My mouth and nose purged exceedingly such yellow, white, and tawny matters as I never saw before. When a pint of this gear was come forth, my head and all my body was in exceeding good temper and my brain marvellously clear.

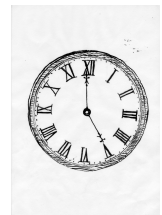


I cast away the carcasses and garbage, saving the tongues and the ears. And thus I prepared them: I took all the ears and scalded off the hair; and when they all were like a dry jelly, I added herbs and pounded them afresh; then divided it in two parts, and made two little pillows. And then I fried these pillows in oil and laid them hot to mine ears and kept them there till nine at night. I took the tongues and sod them in wine; then added to them of new cat's dung an ounce, mustard seed, garlic and pepper as much, and I made lozenges thereof.



THE WHOLESOMEST THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS MOST TOOTHsome.

At **six a clock**, I ate the rest of the meat; and **two hours after**, heating in a frying pan my pillows afresh I laid them to mine ears and tied a kerchief about my head and, with my lozenges in a box, I went among the servants, among whom was a shrewd boy, a very crack-rope, that needs would know what was in my box; and I to sauce him after his sauciness called them "prescencial pills", affirming that whoso might eat one of them should not only understand wonders but also prophesy after them. Whereupon the boy entreated me to give him one, and when at last very loathly (as it seemed) I granted his request, he took a lozenge, put it in his mouth, and chewed it apace, by means whereof, when the fume ascended, he began to spattle and spit, saying



SPEAKER 2: By God's bones, it is a cat's turd.

STREAMER: At this the company laughed, and so did I too. But that he might not spew too much by imagination, I took a lozenge in my mouth, showing thereby that it was not evil. Then methought I heard one cry with a loud voice

SPEAKER 4: Where is Isegrim?²⁰

20. The cat's name, *Isegrim*, dates back to the medieval literary cycle *Reynard the Fox*, where it is the name of a wolf.

All the cats' names are suggestive: *Grisard* means 'greyish' and *Polnoir* suggests a cat that is black, or has a black head.

STREAMER: and I asked who was Isegrim, saying that someone called him, but they said that they knew none of that name, nor heard any call. No? quoth I (for it called still), Hear you nobody? Who is that called so loud?

ALL: **We hear nothing but a cat which mews above in the leads.**

STREAMER: When I saw that I understood what the cat said, glad was I as any man alive and, taking my leave of them got me privily to the place from which I had viewed the cats the night before. And when I had settled myself there, I put in my nostrils two lozenges and in my mouth two more. And to hear the better I took off my pillows which stopped mine ears and listened as attentively as I could; but the filmy rime that lieth within the bottom of mine earhole, from whence little veins carry the sounds to the senses, was with this medicine so purged and parched, the least noises sounded so disordered and monstrous I could discern no cry from another. It seemed there was nothing within an hundred mile of me done on any side, but I heard it as well as if I had been next to it. Lord, what ado women made in their beds! some scolding, some laughing, some weeping, some singing to their sucking children, which made a woeful noise with their continual crying, and one shrewd wife a great way off (I think near to Cat Lane) called her husband “Cuckold” so loud and shrilly that I heard that plain, and would fain have heard the rest but could not, by means of:²¹

21. Here the other performers, who primarily assume a listening role in this part, co-deliver this onomatopoeic verse section, lifted more or less verbatim from the original. The moment in performance reflects what is happening to Streamer here, silence giving way to sudden cacophonous sound.



SPEAKER 4: barking of dogs, grunting of hogs²²,
SPEAKER 2: wauling of cats, rumbling of rats,
SPEAKER 1: gagging of geese, humming of bees,
SPEAKER 2: rousing of bucks, gagging of ducks,
SPEAKER 4: singing of swans, ringing of pans,
SPEAKER 1: crowing of cocks, sewing of socks,
SPEAKER 4: cackling of hens, scrabbling of pens,
SPEAKER 2: peeping of mice, trulling of dice,
SPEAKER 1: curling of frogs and toads in the bogs,
SPEAKER 2: chirping of crickets, shutting of wickets,
SPEAKER 4: shrieking of owls, fluttering of fowls,
SPEAKER 1: routing of knaves, snorting of slaves,
SPEAKER 2: farting of churls, fizzling of girls,

22. While cats are at the heart of Baldwin's text, its world is populated by many different beasts and birds – including those who are sacrificed to Streamer's experiment.



STREAMER: with many things else, as

SPEAKER 4: ringing of bells, counting of coins, mounting of groins,
SPEAKER 1: whispering of lovers, springling of plovers,
SPEAKER 2: groaning and spewing, baking and brewing, scratching and rubbing, watching and shrugging,

STREAMER: with such a sort of commixed noises as would deaf anybody to have heard. And then the greatest bell in Saint Botulph's steeple, which is hard by, was tolled for some rich body, that then lay in passing and the sound came with such a rumble into mine ear that I thought all hell had broken loose and I cried out as loud as ever I could, "The devil, the devil, the devil!"



But when some folk, roused by my noise, found me not in my chamber, they went about calling,

ALL: **Where is he? Where is he? I cannot find Master Streamer!**

STREAMER: which noise was so great in mine ears that I thought they were devils which sought and asked for me. I hid in the chimney, saying many prayers to save me from them. And as I was there, a crow²³, which had nodded asleep on the chimney top, fell down it and when I felt him on my head, I thought the devil had seized upon me. And when I cast up my hand and touched him, he swore at me in his language such that it brought me to myself again. I realised it was the servants who sought me and the bell which had put me in fear (for which I never loved bells since). And, seeing that they would not stop calling and seeking till they had found me, I went down and pretended a cat had been in my chamber and 'fraid me - whereupon they went to bed again, and I to my hiding place.

23. The absurdity of the crow incident exemplifies the use of bathos in the text, where the arrogance of scholars and their 'knowledge' is comically punctured.

*Musical interlude. The Catswalk amongst the audience, distributing philtres and lozenges.*²⁴

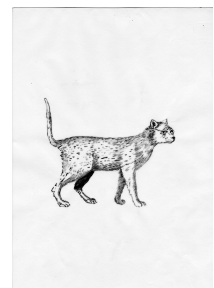
SPEAKERS 1 and 4: [Song]

Listen with Streamer
Now sit back and dream of
The cats at court, with their laws and their talk
Listen and open your minds

Hear how they see us, outthink and deceive us
As we in pride, minds so self-satisfied
Think that we govern the world

Come hear these merry tales
These scary tales
These magic tales
Come hear how cats can scrap, cats can fight
Cats can scrat and bite
Hear how cats organise, socialise, problematize
Come sit and listen hard to Beware the Cat
Listen all all, listen now, listen hard to Beware the Cat

24. The philtres were juice shots juice mixed with edible glitter; the lozenges, sweets.



SPEAKER 1: The third part of Master Streamer's oration²⁵

STREAMER: By this time the cats which were there the night before were assembled only the great grey one excepted. Unto whom, as soon as she was come, all the rest did their 'beisance as they did the night before. And thus she began in her language, which I understood as well as if she had spoken English:

GOOD MANNERS AMONG CATS.

GRISARD: Ah, my dear friends –seeing that **by the grace of Hagat and Heg**, I am now come, although as I perceive by the tail of the Great Bear the fifth hour of our night approacheth, yet seeing this is the last night of my charge and tomorrow I must again to my Lord Cammoloch...

STREAMER: At this all the cats spread along their tails and cried, **Hagat and Heg, save him!**

GRISARD: Go to now, good Mouse-slayer.

MOUSE-SLAYER: I will, my Lady Grisard,

STREAMER: quoth Mouse-slayer, which is the cat which stood before the great cat the night before, continually mewling, who in her language, after that with her tail she had made courtesy said,

MOUSE-SLAYER TELLETH ON HER STORY.

MOUSE-SLAYER: My Lady Grisard, with Isegrim and Polnoir your assistants, upon a complaint put up that false accuser Catchrat who beareth me malice because I **refused his lecherously offered delights** I come before this honourable company, to declare my whole life since the blind days of my kittlinghood.²⁶

You remember, I trust, how in the two nights passed, I have declared my life for four years' space, wherein you perceive how I behaved me all that time. Wherefore to begin where I left last, you shall understand I left the City and went to dwell in Stratford-upon-Avon. This was **when the Mass was forbidden upon penalty.**

CATS ARE ADMITTED TO ALL SECRETS.

25. Where Part I presents an argument between multiple voices or 'scholars', and Part 2 is dominated by Streamer, in Part 3 feline speech takes over. Streamer, peeping and eavesdropping through a trellis, is mute and marginal; in the performance, the actor playing him had by this point taken on the (largely non-speaking) job of projecting the visual images. Narrative and performance also echo the shift in the piece from predominantly male to predominantly female voices.



26. Gender tensions run through the whole text but are foregrounded and explicit in Part 3. Mouse-slayer is on trial for refusing to mate, except on her own terms, and, she later admits, for defying the 'holy law' that requires female cats to submit to as many as ten males in a night. To magnify the female voice, the cat court was presided over by Lady (rather than Lord) Grisard, who ultimately supports and praises Mouse-slayer's declaration of her own good character.

But I saw and heard many privily and nightly said by mischievous subtle ministers, one who even claimed he could heal the blind. But sure, if this were true it were good for us to hire priests at our delivery to sing a Mass before our kittlings, that they might in their birth be delivered of their blindness.

DEVOUT KITTLINGS THAT HEARD MASS SO YOUNG.

And when I was come to London again I was great with kittling and got in favour and household with an old gentlewoman, a widow. This woman got her living by boarding young gentlemen, for whom she kept always fair wenchens in store. Notwithstanding that she used these wicked practices, she was very religious and although that **all images were forbidden**, kept she one of our Lady in her coffer. Every night would she privily fetch her out and light two or three wax candles before her and then kneel down to her saying over her beads and praying her to be good unto her, promising that then she would serve her during all her life.



While I was with this woman, on nights while she was praying I would play with her beads and catch them as she let them fall and would sometime put my head in the compass of them and run away with them about my neck, whereat many times she took great pleasure and so did our Lady too. For my dame would say to her,

DAME: Yea, blessed Lady, I know thou hearest me by thy smiling at my cat.

OLD WOMEN LOVE THEIR CATS.

MOUSE-
SLAYER:

And never did my dame do me any hurt save once, and that I was even with her for:

There was a gentleman, one of her boarders, much enamoured in the beauty of a merchantman's wife in the City, whom he could **by no means persuade to satisfy his lust**, so much she esteemed her good name and honesty. Wherefore he brake his mind to my dame and entreated her to aid him to win this young woman's favour. My dame found the mean to desire this young woman to a dinner and, against she should come, my dame gave me a piece of a pudding which she had filled full of mustard. Which as soon as I had ate, wrought so in my head that it made mine eyes run all the day after; and she blew pepper in my nose

to make me sneeze. And when the young wife was come, I came and sat by my dame. When the young woman, hearing me cough and seeing me weep continually, asked what I ailed, my dame brast forth a-weeping and said,

WOMEN CAN WEEP WHEN THEY WILL.

DAME: In faith, mistress, I think I am the infortunatest woman alive lo, here mine only daughter which – though I say it, I – was as fair a woman and as fortunately married as any in this City, GOD hath (for her honesty or cruelty, I cannot tell whether) turned into this likeness wherein she hath been continually weeping, and lamenting her wretchedness.



MOUSE-SLAYER: The young woman, astonished at this, asked her for what cause she was so altered.

DAME: Ah,

WOMEN ARE ORATORS BY NATURE.

MOUSE-SLAYER: quod my dame,

DAME: this my daughter, being so beloved of her husband and loving again to him was loved exceedingly of another young man, who made great suit and labour unto her. But she, esteeming her honesty and promise made unto her husband, refused still his desire; but came at the last and told me it. I charged her in any case, which full oft since I have repented, that she should not consent unto him, but to shake him off with shrewd words and threatening answers.

SHARP WORDS AND THREATENING ANSWERS WILL COOL HOT ADULTERERS.

She did so – alas, alas, the while – and the young man, went home and fell sick and forpined and **languished upon his bed the space of three days**, receiving neither meat nor drink, and then, perceiving his death to approach, said (to his honest nurse, who was our neighbour),

SPEAKER 2: this much I desire, call her who caused my misery to visit me. If she refuses this to do, I beseech the gods immortal, to whom immediately I go, that either they change that honest, stony heart or else disfigure that fair, merciless favour.

DAME: My daughter esteemed this as she did his suits before: she sent him a rough answer in writing. But ere the boy came home with

it, his master was dead. At the very moment of his death a voice cried aloud,

ALL: **Ah, flinty hart, repent thy cruelty!**

DAME: And immediately she was changed as you now see her.²⁷ Whereupon I gather that as **all extremities are vices**, so it is a vice as appeareth plainly by the punishment of my daughter to be too extreme in honesty, chastity, or any other kind of virtue.

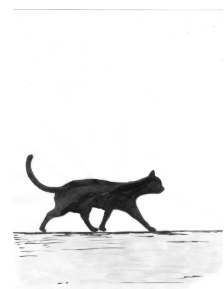
27. Another example where the distinction between women's and cats' bodies becomes blurred. See also note 13.

NOTE THE CRAFT OF A BAWD.

MOUSE-SLAYER:

This so sank into the young woman's mind that she promised the aforesaid gentleman she would be glad to meet him to fulfil his lust. By this means was this innocent woman brought to whoredom.²⁸ Shortly after, this young woman begged me of my dame, and to her I went. In which year, as all the cats in the parish can tell, I never disobeyed or transgressed our holy law, refusing the concupiscential company of any cat nor the act of generation – although sometimes it were more painful to me then pleasant – if it were offered in due and convenient time. Indeed, I confess I refused **Catchrat** and bit him and scrat him, which our law forbiddeth. For on a time this year when I was great with kittling I found him in a gutter eating of a bat, which he had caught that evening and, as you know, not only we but also women with child do oft **long for many things**, so I then longed for a piece of the reremouse and desired him, for saving of my kitten, to give me a morsel. But he, like a ravenous churl, ate it all up and would give me none. I was sick two days after, and had it not been for good dame Isegrim, who brought me a piece of a mouse and made me believe it was of a bat, I had lost my burden, by kittening ten days before my time. When I was recovered and went abroad again, this cruel churl met me and needs would be doing with me, I told him, which he might see by my belly, what case I was in – tush, there was no remedy. For all that I could say, **he would have his will**. I seeing that he would ravish me perforce, cried out for help as loud as ever I could squawl and, to defend myself till succour came, I scrat and bit as hard as ever I could; had not Isegrim and her son, Lightfoot, come the sooner (who both are here and can witness) he would have marred me quite. Now whether I might in this case refuse him and do as I did without breach of our holy law, which **forbiddeth females to refuse any males not exceeding**

28. The blend of seeming solemnity with low comedy and ribald action is reminiscent of Chaucer.



29. Mouse-slayer asserts her right to refuse the sexual advances of a male. See also note 26.

the number of 10 in a night²⁹, judge you, my lords, to whom the interpretation of the laws belongeth.

GRISARD: Yes, surely, for in the third year of the reign of Glascalon, at a court holden in Catwood they decreed upon that exception, forbidding any male in this case to force any female and that upon great penalties. But now tell us how you behaved you with your new mistress, and that as briefly as you can for, the goblins' hour approacheth.

MOUSE-SLAYER: In the house of my young mistress dwelt an ungracious fellow, who once took four walnut shells and filled them full of soft pitch and put them upon my feet and then put my feet into cold water till the pitch was hardened and then he let me go.

A CAT WAS SHOED.

How strange it was to go in shoes, and how they vexed me; for when I ran upon any steep thing, they made me slide and fall down. All that afternoon, for anger that I could not get off my shoes, I hid me in a corner of the garret, under which my master and mistress lay. And at night when they were all in bed, I spied a mouse playing in the flour and when I ran at her to catch her, my shoes made such a noise upon the boards that it waked my master, who was a man very fearful of sprites. When he with his servants harkened well to the noise, which sounded as it had been the trampling of an horse, they waxed all afraid, they saw my glistening eyes, they fell down backward crying out,



ALL: **The devil, the devil, the devil!**

MOUSE-SLAYER: and running naked as they were into the street. The neighbours arose and called up an old priest, who went to the church and took out of the font some of the christening water and fet a piece of holy candle, and came to the house and, with his candle-light in the one hand and a holy water sprinkle in the other hand, up he came, praying, toward the garret, and all the people after him. And when I saw this, thinking I should have seen some Mass that night as many nights before in other places I had, I ran towards them. But when the priest heard me come, down he fell upon them that were behind him; his holy candle fell into another priest's breech beneath – who was conjuring our maid at the stair foot – and all to-besinged him, for he was so afraid with the noise of the rest which fell that he had not the power to put it out. When I saw all this business, down I ran where they lay on heaps. The old priest, which was so tumbled among them that his face lay upon a boy's bare arse, which belike was fallen headlong under him, was astonished; then when the boy (which

for fear beshit himself) had all to-rayed his face, he neither felt nor smelt it nor removed from him.

FEAR TAKETH AWAY THE SENSES.

Then went I to my dame which lay among the rest, God knoweth very madly, and so mewed and curled about her, that at last she said,

DAME: I ween it be my cat.

MOUSE-
SLAYER:

That hearing, the knave that had shooed me, calling to mind that erst he had forgot, said it was so indeed and nothing else. That hearing the priest, in whose holy breech the holy candle all this while lay burning, rose up and took the candle in his hand and looked upon me and all the rest of the company and fell a-laughing at the handsome lying of his fellow's face. The rest, hearing him, came every man to himself and arose and looked upon me and cursed the knave which had shooed me. This done, they got hot water and dissolved the pitch and plucked off my shoes and then every man, after they desired each other not to be a-known of this night's work, for shame departed to their lodgings.



STREAMER: When all the cats, and I too had laughed at this apace, Mouse-slayer proceeded:

MOUSE-
SLAYER:

After this I played another prank: the gentleman, who was accepted and retained of my mistress, came often home and always in my master's absence was **doing with my dame**.

CHANCE OFTENTIMES BETRAYS EVIL.

Wherefore desirous that my master might know it I sought how I might bewray them, which as hap would came to pass thus: while this gentleman was **doing with my dame**, my master came in so suddenly that he had no leisure to pluck up his hose but, with them about his legs, ran into a corner behind the painted cloth and there stood, I warrant you, as still as a mouse. As soon as my master came in, his wife caught him about the neck and kissed him and devised many means to have got him forth again but he, being weary, sat down and called for his dinner, and when she saw there was none other remedy, she brought it him. I, seeing this, got behind the cloth and, to make the man speak, I all to-pawed him with my claws upon his bare legs and buttocks, and for all this he never moved. But my master heard me and,



thinking I was catching a mouse, bad my dame go help me. She, knowing what beast was there, came to the cloth and called me

DAME: Come puss, come puss,

MOUSE-SLAYER: and cast me meat into the floor. But I seeing that scratching could not move him leapt up and caught him by the genitals³⁰ with my teeth and bit so hard that, when he had restrained more than I thought any man could, at last he cried and caught me by the neck thinking to have strangled me.

IT IS JUSTICE TO PUNISH THOSE PARTS THAT OFFEND.

My master, not smelling but hearing such a rat as was not wont to be about such walls, came to the cloth and lift it up and there he found this bare-arsed gentleman strangling me, who had his stones in my mouth. When I saw my master I let go my hold, and the gentleman his, and away I ran immediately.

Thus have I told you, my good friends, all things that happened through me, wherein you perceive my loyalty and obedience to all good laws and how falsely I am accused for a transgressor.³¹

STREAMER: When Grisard, Isegrim, and Polnoir, the commissioners, had heard this declaration of Mouse-slayer, they praised her much. They then commanded her with all the cats there to be on Saint Katherine's day next ensuing at Catcliffe. I, glad to have heard that I heard and sorry that I had not understood what was said the other two nights before, got me to my bed and slept agood. The next night when I harkened to two cats which, as I perceived by their gestures, spake of the same matter, I understood never a word.³²

ALL: **Lo, here have we told you all a wonderful matter and yet as incredible as it is wonderful.**

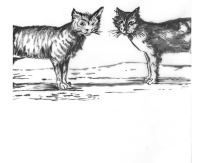
WUNDERS ARE INCREDIBLE.

SPEAKER 1: **An Exhortation**³³

SPEAKER 2: I know these things will seem marvellous to many men, that cats should understand and speak, have a governor among themselves, and be obedient to their laws; and were it not for the approved authority of the ecstatical author of whom I heard it, I should myself be as doubtful as they. But if anyone for doubt

30. This graphic description of Mouse-slayer catching the adulterer by the genitals drew laughter from the audience. An effective castration (cat/stration?), the moment also crystallises the reversal of hierarchies in the story from masculine to feminine power.

31. Mouse-slayer has told stories of vice and folly to establish her own good character: having been exploited in a ruse to 'satisfy [a gentleman's] lust', she retaliates by exposing and ridiculing human lechery where she finds it; forced to suffer the indignity of wearing shoes, she uses them to make the whole village ridiculous. While ostensibly Part 3 grants Streamer (and the reader/audience) access to the hidden world of cats, in practice Mouse-slayer's tales present humankind back to us, critically perceived through the eyes of an animal.



32. An abrupt ending. Streamer seems to accept that his privileged access was for one night only: this implies the philtre's success was bought magically rather than by scientific method. An abrupt release for the audience too, as they emerge from an intense hour of listening and watching.

33. The Exhortation closes the performance on a playful note in the guise of giving urgent moral guidance. It makes an appropriate end for a satirical work that commingles the lofty and the ludicrous throughout.

hereof do put away their cat, then shall their so doing testify their secret naughty living. And that we may take profit by this declaration of Master Streamer, let us so live both openly and privily that neither our own cat, admitted to all secrets, be able to declare aught of us to the world save that what is laudable and honest, nor the devil's cat, which – will we or nill we – seeth and writeth all our ill doings. And ever when you goest about anything, call to mind this proverb,



ALL: **Beware the Cat.**

[Music to leave by]