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Baldwin's communicating cats

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ABSTRACT

The article looks at William Baldwin's idea of the cat as companion, the animal functioning as a potentially wild and alien companion to human sociality and family spaces. Baldwin probes the flesh-eating fears Tudor citizens harboured about the cats in their midst; and explores the witness role they play occupying liminal positions between the sexes, sectarian extremes, public and private spaces, in ways that interrogate the boundaries between animal and human zones. The essay argues that cats are dreamt as hybrid animals, wild and tame, killers and companions. Their meat-eating powers, their sexual prowess and ambiguous witnessing of human privacies are seen as triggering deep-seated anxieties fostered by the sectarian ideological conflicts of Tudor politics and religion. Baldwin's novel also looks at the ways cats' secret witnessing reveals the sexual secrets of the Tudor domestic sphere, as from a female point of view; and how, with Mouse-slayer's revenge, that witnessing turns against the human as species to create a narrative of radical animal resistance to domestication and subservience.

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William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* stages the communication of cats as a satirical device to enable the *fabliau* comedy to strike home against various human targets, particularly Catholic sinfulness, domestic sexual behaviour, secret appetites of all kinds; which the cats, as silent observers in households, allow the readers access to. This access depends, though, on the cats' witness-consciousnesses being given sufficient voice and intelligence so that they are capable of passing on what they see as subversive story. The cats act as comic prosthetic eyes, revealing the candid access the companion animals have to concealed human behaviour behind

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closed doors. But Baldwin pushes at the analogy of cats to secret story-teller witness in the bawdy, anti-clerical and satirical tale further than is necessary for the jokes to function – much of the novel dwells very entertainingly on the odd and startling facts of cats, from philosophical, cultural and species-specific points of view. It is these features of the novel which connect the text to a lively tradition of thinking about feline presence in human environments from Michel de Montaigne to Jacques Derrida. My essay examines Baldwin's probing of the flesh-eating fears Tudor citizens harboured about the cats in their midst; at the witness role played by the domestic animals as occupying liminal subject positions between the sexes, sectarian extremes, public and private spaces; at the ways Baldwin's puzzling away at the speech/silence binary through cats' spookily knowing presence in households is animated by the opposition between the silence of print and the voicing of oral performance; and at the role played by cats as story-telling animals, their gestures, vocalisations and social practices geared into thinking about the tall-tail arts of narrative. These considerations raise questions about animal companionship in human environments, and give cats a particularly salient role in the quizzing of the boundaries between animal and cultural zones of presence and being. The essay argues that cats are dreamt as hybrid animals, wild and tame, killers and companions, and that their communication is as mysterious as the leap from print to voice. That mystery has to do with the fear of their meat-eating powers, their sexual prowess and ambiguous witnessing of human privacies which triggered both deep-seated anxieties and divisions fostered by the sectarian ideological conflicts of Tudor politics and religion. Baldwin's novel also looks at the ways cats' secret witnessing reveals the sexual secrets of the Tudor domestic sphere, as from a female point of view; and how, with Mouse-slayer's revenge, that witnessing turns against the human as species to create a narrative of radical animal resistance to domestication and subservience.

Killer-companions and the printed voice

In the Preface to the 1584 edition, Baldwin tells John Young that he has 'penned for your maisterships pleasure, one of the stories which M. Streamer tolde last Christmas, and whiche you so faine would haue heard reported by M. ferrers him selfe'.[1] The story is presented as not only true, but originating with one of the characters in the novel, Streamer, and Baldwin raises from the start the problematic distinction between a written account and an oral tale: 'although I be vnable to pen or speak the same so pleasantly as [Ferrers] coulde'. But that doubt is dispelled straightaway – Baldwin goes on to assert that he has

> so neerly vsed bothe the order and woords of him that spake them, which is not the least vertue of a reporter, that I dout not but that he and M. willot shal in the reading think they hear M. Streamer speak, and he him self in the like action, shal dout whether he speaketh or readeth. (p. 3)

Baldwin draws into the same orbit the fidelity of his recording of the original oral performance and a magical illusionism creating radical doubt as to whether the narrative voice read on the page is summoning a real speaking voice into being or not. That superstition about print-as-real voice is nudged carefully into alignment with the speaking cat trope of the fable-satire through the theatrical frame narrative that foregrounds the shift from script to voice.[2] Baldwin is an actor performing interludes at the court and he is residing at the chamber of the Master of the Revels, Mr. Ferrers. The novel opens with Baldwin remarking on a version of Aesop's fable about crows put on by the King's Players 'wherin the moste part of the actors were birds, the deuice wherof I discommended, saying it was not Comicall to make either speechlesse things to speeke: or brutish things to commcn [converse] reasonably' (p. 6). Fables make speechless things speak: the phrasing picks up on the Argument's repeated reference to speaking, suggesting a parallel linking two contrasts: (i) between the silent reading of print and the oral performance of speaking and (ii) between animal speechlessness and human speaking and reasoning. Streamer, the Divine of the Master of the Revels, claims to have proof that animals can speak and reason. It is his series of tales which serves to instil the radical doubt about the distinction between animal and human voice and capacity to reason; that doubt drawing on the magical superstition about print (its power to hold real speaking voices in suspension) that unpicks the division between print silence and vocal performance.

Baldwin as a printer was interested in that magical transition between print and voice. Trudy Ko has defined the novel as a hybrid text, 'both oral and textual',[3] while Rachel Stenner has demonstrated how the representation of handwriting, or 'penning' in the novel, negotiates a liminal space between the oral and the textual.[4] The theatrical frame adds a further dimension: the transition from playtext to performance as an enacting of magical or comic transformation of actor into other being. The scepticism of the character G.B. (as Baldwin fictionalises himself) about how comic it is to watch animals speak and reason is based on a refusal to countenance performances which stage animals as rational humans in disguise, 'liuely parsonages' who are brought onstage 'to speake, doo, reason, and allege authorites out of authours' (p. 6). Yet Streamer's tales are designed to convince us that it is legitimate and comic to stage cats as just such lively personages, contradicting Baldwin's 'discommending'. The novel sets up the communicating cats as actors on the stage of the printed page, and the careful description of their first discovery brings out this theatricality, based on the superstition that print harbours real voices in its inked letters. The loose analogy set up between writing and animal speech as performative implies that there is something about cats that connects theatricality, mysterious communication, and the alleging of authority. That this might have something to do with the superstitions attached to cats, that they are witches' familiars, that their

crossing of our paths may be ominous, that they may be in league with dark forces, is one aspect.[5] Another is the role they played in houses in the Tudor period: they were there both as tame pet companions, and as wild killers of mice and rats.[6] That dual role feeds in to the superstitions in such a way as to render uncanny the very presence and gaze of the cat within the domestic setting. Much of the incidental humour of *Beware the Cat* rests on this suspicion that the cat as pet companion is only play-acting that role for the comforts humans give in exchange.[7] Their unsettling gaze on the humans in the houses implies a secret knowledge linked to their feral killing instincts, a species consciousness that is alien and dangerous.[8]

Flesh-eating scene on the leads

The uncanny danger of cats is played out in the first allusion to cats in the narrative. Streamer tells Ferrers, Baldwin, and Willot the story of cats as they lie in bed ready for the night – he takes them back to a time when he lodged at St Martin's Lane in Aldersgate at printer John Day's house next to Day's printer's shop. The house is situated on a prominence, so its first floor looks out over the roofs of the Gate – it is on the leads of the Gate that the quartered bodies of criminals executed at Smithfield are displayed on poles (and these would have included the bodies of Catholics executed for refusing to recognise Henry VIII's supremacy, like Thomas Abel and Richard Fetherstone, hung drawn and quartered at Smithfield in 1540). Streamer cannot sleep, he says, because of the caterwauling cats at night; and it is implied that the cats gather there to eat the flesh of the dismembered bodies. Streamer preaches against the practice of displaying the quartered body-parts as against nature and scripture and he suspects that men do it to 'féed & please the Deuils', just as the worshippers of the pagan sacrificial god Moloch were said to feed on the flesh of their victims on poles if their sacrifices failed (p. 10). The wild miaowing of the cats identifies them as creaturely manifestations of those Molochite Devils, and it is notable that Baldwin represents the rooftop as a theatre of such dark secrets. He carefully parallels the story-telling frame, where Streamer is telling his cat tales to the men associated with the theatre, with the inner frame of Streamer and the Aldersgate narrators and listeners:

> on a time I was sitting by the fire with certain of the house: I told them what a noise & what a wawling the Cats had made there ye night before from ten a clock til one, so that neither I could sléep nor study for them. And by menes of this introduction: we fel in communication of Cats. (p. 11)

The communication of cats is connected, then, to the flesh-eating scene on the leads, and it is significant that we first hear the cats as feral carnivorous devils before we see them. This primal scene of sarcophagy is related by association with the double nature of all animals, for Streamer: they may

be wild but they can also reason, and one of his examples in the Argument before he begins his cat stories describes 'Foxes and Dogges that after they had been all night a brode killing Geese and Sheep, would come home in the morning and put their necks into their collers' (p. 6). The secret communication of the cats is a night-time assembly, a species reunion that is a dark and theatrical scene, staging the obverse to the tame single animal in the house. Streamer later states that he spies on the assembly 'in the dark standing closely: I vewed through the trellice as wel as I could, all their gestures and behauiour' (p. 33), as though from an inn window onto a courtyard theatre. It is the theatre's lure that it displays secret behaviour in the glare of the public world; Streamer's secret espionage implies a guilty private version of theatre's display of secrets, and this feeds in to the feverish sectarian logic of the text, merging fear of Catholic conspiracy and the 'flesh-eating' doctrine of transubstantiation with Protestant private conscience and anticipation of the devil's temptations. The cat as both pet companion to private lives, as singular tame animal and night-time devil, as part of a wild species, as a creature acting both in the private theatre of the house and on the public stage of the city, attracts sectarian fantasies and fears as much as it triggers more ancient terrors of the loving creature that might switch to flesh-eating monster once darkness falls.[9]

Baldwin's staging of the cat as harbourer of the illicit secrets of a wild species corresponds to E.T.A. Hoffmann's Murr, a cat that learns, like Frankenstein's monster, how to read and write human language through observation of the text whilst hearing Abraham his master read the text aloud: 'By comparing the written signs with the words he spoke, I very soon learned to read'.[10] The text we read, weirdly interlaced with the life story of Abraham's friend Kreisler (because Murr mangled the two texts in a wild frenzy), allows us access to the animal's interiority and life story, equated by Hoffmann with access to the 'strange and alien form' of the mind's unconscious, wild and secret appetites, dreams and desires (p. 20). The interlacing of Kreisler and Murr's biographies creates, as Sarah Koffman argues in *Autobiogriffures*, a hybrid biography that 'blurs the borders between humanity and animality' and makes the text into a 'thanatography, effacing all biographical traces' because it effaces the proper name signature of the unique author.[11] *Beware the Cat* is similarly hybrid with rival human and cat narrators, notably Streamer and Mouse-Slayer, and stages Baldwin as just one of the characters that tell the sequence of cat fables, effacing any trace of his authorial authority. The textual version of the unconscious in Baldwin's novel that corresponds to Hoffmann's strange and alien form represents the wild species instincts Baldwin saw at work behind the scenes of the cultivated pet cat's behaviour, revealed in the dark theatre of the night. And what is revealed at night is the communication of cats. Hoffmann's cats speak human language late in

the novel: Murr preserves his silent catlike form with his humans whilst secretly writing his text in private, as part of Hoffmann's satire of the tame artist and the increasingly privatised dreaming of the creative instinct. Baldwin's cats speak from the very beginning: and it is this that ratifies their magical powers.

Cannock Chase and the cat's gaze

The first cat to speak does so in a sequence that is very carefully presented by Baldwin. Sitting by the printer's fireplace in Aldersgate, a servant tells the story of a cat encountered in Cannock Chase ('Kank wood') leaping out on a Staffordshire man who at home 'had a yung Cat which he had brought vp of a kitling & would nightly dally and play with it' (p. 11). The Cannock cat tells him to tell his young cat that Grimalkin is dead. 'This doon shée went her way, and the man went forward about his busines' (p. 12). That evening he tells his wife the story and his cat 'which had harkned vnto the tale, looked vpon him sadly and at the last said. And is Grimmalkin dead then farewel Dame, & therwith went her way and was neuer séen after' (p. 12). What is quietly implied is that the Staffordshire man can understand the cat's speech because he plays with his cat at night, the time of the wild darkness, thus transgressing the tame/wild border of cat identity. 'Kank wood' is the scene of the encounter perhaps because Cannock Chase (*Beware the Cat* written and set in 1553) had only the decade before passed from the Catholic church to private hands; to the hands of Sir William Paget of Beaudesert, faithful Protestant administrator brought down by Somerset's disgrace in 1550 (despite his own misgivings about his policies),[12] committed to the Tower in 1551, restored to Edward VI's favour in 1553, and then restored to the privy council by Mary later in 1553. Paget was a realist politician and advisor to the Lord Protector, but recognised that the English were, as Barrett Beer has argued, 'still Catholic at heart and feared the flood of Protestant reforms',[13] even writing to Somerset that Protestantism was '"not yet printed in the stomachs of the eleven of twelve parts in the realm"'.[14] Paget's family and heirs would become recusant rebels later in the century in the Throckmorton Plot, and it is possible that having Grimalkin's messenger encounter a cat-sympathiser in Cannock Chase speaks to Baldwin's suspicion of this secretly Catholic-sympathising clan. As a printer in a wildly sectarian age, he knew about Reformation printing of stomachs in the realm.

The message changes the Staffordshire cat's behaviour: hearing it in the form of its master's tale to his wife, she looks upon the man sadly, then 'at the last' speaks, not to the master but to the dame. That sad look is key: it speaks to the prestige power of the cat's gaze, as full of the potential of secret communication. It communicates a capacity for melancholy

knowledge, on the cusp of utterance. This might be placed in relation to Derrida's account of not being able to sustain his cat's gaze on him naked:

> I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am* – and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat, I have trouble yes a bad time overcoming my embarrassment.[15]

The gaze triggers shame and shame at being ashamed, as well as a series of rhetorical questions that in the end lead Derrida to Genesis and Adam's naming of the animals. The young cat's sad gaze in the Baldwin novel, on the surface mourning the death of Grimalkin, connects to the 'deep sadness' of animality[16] – a Benjamin concept which Derrida elaborates as a symptom of the anthropocentric and Adamic gesture of naming, of speech and language as simultaneously projective (human projection of animality on all non-human creatures through language) and exclusionary (the animal is that which cannot speak and therefore reason). At the same time, the cat's gaze triggers a Cain-like guilt and recoil from what is, for Derrida, a mental mirror figuring forth both the messy and complex set of limits between the human and more-than-human, and the 'point of view of the absolute other' of the specific cat who gazes.[17]

In Baldwin, the young cat hearkens to the man's tale, gives him the sad look, then pauses before speaking – and the utterance is a farewell, an erasure of the tame cat and the pet role that had been performed principally for the Dame's benefit, she who manages the domestic space. Derrida suggests at several points in 'The Animal That Therefore I Am' that the cat's gaze asserts a capacity to erase traces which is its principal manner of responding: 'the power to *respond* – to *pretend*, to *lie*, to *cover its tracks*, or *erase* its own traces' ('The Animal', p. 401). It is the erasure that is the cat's prerogative, most famously staged in Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat's dissolving away. The Cheshire Cat 'vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin', the very sign of the cat's dubiety, its teeth set in a grin, both sign of tame friendliness to the human child, and a reminder of the weapons it uses for the kill.[18] This is a double role Alice recognises: 'The Cat only grinned when it saw Alice. It looked good-natured, she thought: still it had very long claws and a great many teeth, so she felt that it ought to be treated with respect' (*Annotated Alice*, p. 52). In Baldwin's novel the cat's self-erasure occurs in the form of the utterance itself, presented as equivalent to the act of leaving the house. It is noteworthy that the locution for this is 'she therwith went her way' which repeats the phrase used earlier about the Kank wood cat: 'This doon shée went her way'. The borderline between the cat and the human is matched by the borderline between the cat's wild and tame identities: what going her way implies is a gendered freedom to dispense with the traces

imposed on her double nature, in Cannock Chase and in the Staffordshire house, by the interpellations of human language.

The repeated phrase may also imply some connection between the young cat, the Dame and the 'Kank wood' cat as witnesses to the double-dealing of the Staffordshire fellow, a Paget-like figure capable of communing with the 'Cats' or Catholics, and yet at the same time profiting from the Protestant cause that allowed him to appropriate Catholic lands. Much of the resentments of the people had to do with anger at enclosures that robbed them of the common land they needed to graze their 'cattell'. Somerset's downfall was brought about by accusers charging him with mealy-mouthed populism towards such grievances when they exploded into out-and-out revolt with Kett's Rebellion and other violent protests in 1549. Resentment at enclosure was high in Cannock Chase, as Christopher Harrison has shown, leading eventually to riots there in 1580.[19] The proximities of cats, cattel and Catholics are alive between the lines of the Baldwin 'Kank wood' parable: the wild wood where the cat is encountered is common land that was once Catholic and is now appropriated and tamed by the fair-weather double-dealer. The cat's sad look, pause and address to the Dame speaks to contempt for the fellow who plays with her at night yet who would tame the wild commons, conniving in the death of the Grimalkin of cat-liberty.

Sarcophagy of the Grimalkin feast

Streamer is drawn to spying on the assembly of cats as upon a witches' Sabbath, and contrives to cross the species barrier: he cooks up a mess of the carcasses of hedgehog, kite, rabbit, cat, and other animals to create a potion and pill which enable him to understand the cats, modifying a recipe by Albertus Magnus for understanding birds. The relish with which Streamer narrates the hunting and processing and ingestion of the various animals gives comic emphasis to the suspicion that he is becoming a wild predator as he nears the dreadful abyss between human and non-human modes of communication. It is an apt reversal of the human flesh-eating cats and the powers of communication with humans this seems to give them, according to the superstitious logic of Streamer's account: Streamer cooks his recipe with a witch's fervour for transformation, importantly eating cat in order to become familiar with the familiar. Streamer and his fireside interlocutors argue about whether Grimalkin is a witch in a cat's form in a dispute turning on the capacity of the mind to enter into the body of another species, characteristically couched in terms that both articulate prejudice about witches' powers, and presume theatrical mystification: 'bringing their soules for the time out of their bodies, and putting them in the other, or by deluding the sight and fantasies of the séers' (p. 23). Putting the soul in the other may be black magic or an illusion stage-

managed by a showman-magician: either way the move across species is scripted as a transgression into the forbidden sensory and embodied knowledge network of the animal other by way of the ingestion and then inhabiting of the body of the target species.

That act of transgression is clearly a comic and exaggerated version of an act of sympathy with an animal familiar, and conjoins the pet-owner's projections with a more deeply driven fear of another potentially dangerous rival species. David Wood, in his reading of Derrida's essay, 'Thinking with Cats', ponders the ways our ambivalent feelings towards cats, their pet cuteness and wild killer instincts, relate to our unconscious motivations about eating meat:

> We may surmise that the (external) animal we eat stands in for the (internal) animal we must overcome. And by eating, of course, we internalize it! On this reading, our carnivorous violence towards other animals would serve as a mark of our civilization, and hence indirectly legitimate all kinds of other violence. If we are to target anything for transformation it would be this culture (or should we say cult) of fault and sacrifice.[20]

This whole meat-eating complex is played out in the first Irish story told in *Beware the Cat*, where an Anglo-Irish mercenary, Patrik Apore,[21] and his 'boy' massacre a hamlet and steal their 'cattel', a sheep and cow, and cook them in a Catholic church. The narrator berates them for blasphemous disrespect of the holy sanctuary; a marginal gloss states: 'The wilde Irishe men were better then we in reuerencing their Religion' (p. 15). A 'malapart' cat, Grimalkin, arrives and demands in Irish to be fed; in terror they feed it quarter after quarter of the sheep and cow, but its appetite cannot be satisfied and the two men ride away in fear for their lives. Apore kills the pursuing Grimalkin, a horde of cats attack them, killing the boy; Apore gets to his house, tells his wife the tale, and his own 'kitling' says 'hast thou killed Grimmalkin? & therwith she plunged in his face, and with her teeth took him by the throte, & ere shee could be taken away: she had strangled him' (p. 17). The tale stages two sides to cat-lore: first the equivalence of the cats as a wild species to the wild Irish and wild Catholics; and secondly the Gargantuan carnivorous appetite of the wild animal. Grimalkin appears as if to rebuke the kern and his boy for the massacre of the Irish family, and her death announces the future destruction of the pair of marauders – the single cat may be killed; it will be revenged by the fellow animals of its species. It is striking how closely Grimalkin's appetite is in satirical mimetic relation to the meat-eating pair of killers of Catholics, and answers their blasphemy (treating the church as a kitchen and bivouac) with a parody of the Catholic Church's carnal interpretation of communion; for the cat devours the sacrificed animals where the Mass ordinarily takes place. The parody works up as religious satire the double nature of the cat within domestic space: in this house (of God), the cat eats the scraps of

the same meat its masters eat, but then turns into a wild devourer of their flesh in revenge mode. The 'cattel' stand for the inner animal the two men must overcome through sacrifice and ingestion, but their predatory overcoming is turned on them and they become prey to their own carnivorous violence manifesting in the animal they share their sacrifice with.

The sacrificial and sacrilegious sarcophagy of the Grimalkin feast works because of the ways cats transgress the borders between the holy and the Satanic, wild and tame, private and public, companionate play and killer instinct, consumption of human and animal flesh. The transgression works by way of dissimulation and play-acting, as we have seen: cats seem to play-act companionship to feed deeper appetites that accompany concealed wild identity. It works too by way of double-dealing story-telling, as occurs in Streamer's third oration which features the female cat Mouse-slayer and her tale told to the cat authorities on the night-time roof. The logic of this linking of cats to story-telling is laid out in the series of tales that make up her autobiography, all of them featuring either secret witnessing of Catholic Mass and prayer to the Virgin, or witnessing of women's illicit sexual behaviour. Baldwin is playing up the three coordinates of cats' roles in Tudor houses: their hunting skills make them good mouse slayers, linked by association to the indecent eating of flesh; their purring sleepy silkiness make them good companions for dames, making them the animal most likely to behold the secrets of chambers; their sexual voracity makes them good analogues to bawdy tales by the fireside where they accompany the story-telling of an evening. Baldwin turns these three coordinates into a double weapon: to secure the anti-Catholic and anti-clerical satire by having as prime witness the silent eyes of the cat to capture the secret house masses and prayers to the Virgin at a time Catholic worship was being forced underground by the policies of Edward VI; and to capture through cats' eyes the bawdy role women play using narrative and fictional arts to secure sexual satisfactions in an increasingly puritan and patriarchal world.[22] Cats bring the two worlds of religious and sexual secrecy together because they are the witch's familiar: from the Protestant point of view, the sarcophagy of the Mass through the magic of the wafer-as-meat and the devotion to the image of the Virgin play more to secret appetites of the flesh than to religious creed, appetites which we have seen on display when Grimalkin as witch she-cat devours meat in the Irish church and in Patrik Apore's private house when his kitling plunges in his face.

Mouse-slayer and the cat's apish tricks

It is striking how Baldwin's thinking about cats in Tudor culture is also engaged with the real, and with material animal nature, as much as with human projections and superstitions that appropriate their meanings. In

his complex staging of the three coordinates of their social and biological being, their hunting skills, their purring pleasures, their sexual habits, he comes close to an ethical view of the species one might associate with Montaigne. In his 'Apology for William Sebond', written in the 1580s, Montaigne admonished miserable and frail 'man' for his presumption of superiority to, and distinction from, the animals he shares the earth with:

> It is through the vanitie of the same imagination that he dare equall himself to God, that he ascribeth divine conditions unto himself, that he selecteth and separateth himselfe from out the ranke of other creatures; to which his fellow-brethren and compeers he cuts out and shareth their parts, and allotteth them what portions of meanes or forces he thinkes good. How knoweth he by the vertue of his understanding the inward and secret motions of beasts? By what comparison from them to us doth he conclude the brutishnesse he ascribeth unto them? When I am playing with my cat, who knowes whether she have more sport in dallying with me than I have in gaming with her? We entertaine one another with mutuall apish trickes.[23]

Shared play as mutual entertainment is the way men and women interact with their cats, for Montaigne: and it is the mutual apish tricks that cats and humans indulge in when they play together that imply a shared sense of mischief, dissimulation, and emulation in the mutual mimicry of the game. It is important to understand that Montaigne plays with a female cat, his 'chatte', and that the 'singeries reciproques' of the French do very much imply mutual mimicry.[24] What Mouse-slayer's tales reveal is a series of tricks of mutual mimicry that play on the very close relationship between women in the domestic sphere and their cat-companions. Mouse-slayer, in the most famous episode of the third oration, is tricked into playing the role of a young married woman transformed into a cat as punishment for refusing to sleep with a suitor on his death bed; this fictional tale is told to a merchantwoman's wife who has been refusing a lover's advances to convince her it is right to agree to commit adultery if it means saving a man's life. Baldwin insists on the extreme confidentiality and privacy of this act of strategic story-telling, a woman-only scene of gossipy and confessional secrecy: 'they set them down togither at the table, none saue only they two' (p. 62); and it is a private scene that the cat is not only a witness to but dupe of – her mistress feeds her mustard and pepper to make her cry to convince the young woman that Mouse-slayer is the woman of her story transformed, her daughter, weeping at her lot. The cat's fake tears and sneezes are analogous to her mistress's deceits as bawd, her 'lachrimable protestations and déep dissimulation' (p. 63).

These private scenes of dissimulation and fake emotion are meant to chime with scenes earlier in Mouse-slayer's life where she beholds secret Catholics at prayer and at Mass, particularly the scene where an old blind woman is tricked into worshipping the host by a wily magician of a

'ghostly father': 'all wer voyded the chamber saue I & they two' (p. 56). The magician trumpery of the priest's abuse of confession with cat as silent witness is brought into mimetic relation to the bawd's tempting of the married woman: but with the added piquancy of exploitation of the witness cat as actor, prop and magician's apprentice. The magic is in the narrative powers of the mistress as she seduces the young woman; and Rachel Stenner has explored how the mistress's use of a fake letter from the lover (who signs himself G.S. to implicate Streamer) to the bawd's daughter whom Mouse-slayer impersonates is key to convincing the merchantwoman's wife to succumb to her importunate lover:

> Although the daughter rejects the designs of G. S., his prayer is effective because the daughter 'within two days after' (45) is turned into a cat. In the bawd's fiction, and as it might well seem to an illiterate person, the power of the written word is magical and transformative.[25]

The cat as magical actor is ocular and material proof of what the handwritten letter articulates, acting out both the fate of the late G.S.'s loved one and the future fate of the merchantwoman's wife. What the procuress has achieved with her story and weeping cat prop is a deep identification of the young woman with Mouse-slayer: the magical and transformative power of the word enacts a real transformation of the listener and reader of the tale into the cat who is actually now narrating what we read. That crossing of the woman/cat boundary has been prepared for by previous tales that staged the transformation of witch into feline with Grimalkin, and the intimacy of cat and dame in domestic scenes of guilty confessional secrecy. We are being told a tale by a cat, and her powers of persuasion rest on her power to entertain, on her sport in dallying with us as readers/listeners/audience, on the mutuality of her mimicry and tricks.

Mouse-slayer's narrative powers have a very specific aim and outcome; she is being overheard by Streamer on the roof as she argues her case against the rapist-seducer Catchrat to the court of cat-judges surrounded by the body-parts of human traitors. That staged violence and legal and theatrical frame enable Baldwin to explore the roots of bawdy fable in Mouse-slayer's autobiography, and he finds them, startlingly, in the sexual drives connecting transgressive women and their wild/tame cat-companions, and in the more deep-seated enmities and flesh-eating hostilities shaping those drives that pit male against female, cat against master/mistress. What activates those connections and conflicts is the mutually mimetic sympathy between the women and their cats in the majority of the tales, based on a reciprocal play of emotions shaped by a shared sense of theatre, shared longings and desires, shared powers to reveal secrets, shared capacity for violence against the patriarchy. That sharing is perhaps all ruse and projection on the part of the women of the houses: but that is part of the way cats function in

those houses, as play-companions whose mystery, as Montaigne argued, encourages that radical interchange and mutual regard while fostering fantasy identifications across species.

Baldwin stages that radical interchange of identity at several points in Mouse-slayer's narrative: for instance, when she plays with a devout widow's rosary as she prays, Mouse-slayer tells us 'I would bee playing with her bedes, and alway catch them as she let them fall, & would somtime put my head in the compas of them'. This prompts her mistress to say to the image of the Virgin Mary in her secret coffer, 'yea blessed Lady, I knowe thou hearest me by thy smiling at my Cat' (p. 61). The 'bedes' are in honour of the blessed Virgin, and Mouse-slayer's play with them turns them into a necklace plaything, as though play-acting both Mary (she was said to have instituted the rosary when she appeared to St. Dominic in the thirteenth century)[26] and the widow, and revealing the widow's unconscious inhabiting of her cat as pet actor out of her vanity. The cat's play, as trigger for the mistress's theatrical assumption of her pet's daring as her own, is offered to the Virgin as (according to Baldwin's Protestant satire of all image-worship) a sign of a shared amusement, fusing Virgin and widow as audience to the cat's apish tricks.

Humans as prey

Mouse-slayer's *tour de force*, though, is the humiliation of the merchant-woman's wife's lover. Having become the wife's pet, and therefore a party to her adultery, Mouse-slayer plays two roles: one is still to function as her bawd-mistress's daughter transformed by a dead lover's curse, and therefore acting out the merchantwoman's wife's alter ego as the weepy creature of her own injudicious virtue; the other is the cat-as-witness to private sexual secrets. A further role is Mouse-slayer the narrator, telling this tale of revenge on male sexual bravado on the Aldersgate leads in order to underscore her suit against Catchrat; and this role is folded into Streamer's and Baldwin's strategic use of the cat's tale to underline Protestant punishment of sexual transgressions in Catholic households, and to make a bawdy tale purr with feline wild energy. But what marks the story out is the cat's vicious attack on the sexual body. Mouse-slayer has already punished her bawd mistress for the mustard trick by releasing a mouse up her skirts and scratching her in 'her thies and her belly', possibly a metonym for her genitalia (p. 68). She contrives a more vicious version of this attack on the organs of generation with the new mistress's lover, whilst he hides behind a painted cloth wall-hanging, his hose at his ankles, after the husband returns unexpectedly 'while this Gentleman was dooing with my dame' (p. 76). Mouse-slayer, to make the concealed lover reveal himself to his master, 'caught him by the genitalls with my téeth':

> My Maister not smelling but hearing such a Rat as was not wunt to be about suche walles: came to the cloth and lift it vp and there he found this bare arst Gentleman strangling me, who had his stones in my mouth. (p. 77)

The comedy, broad and farcical as it is, has complex implications. Mouse-slayer's assault on the balls of the male lover is designed to culminate in a theatrical revelation of the house's dark secret. The painted cloth acts as a stage curtain, and the image revealed not only outs the adulterer and reveals the wife's infidelity; it displays the very image of the fears levelled at cats in private houses, that they are secretly (behind the scenes) wild cats pretending to be tame. The literally obscene picture behind the painted cloth figures forth Mouse-slayer's wild role as killer of rats, identified by her as narrator as the human male ('such a Rat'), and therefore associated with the hated Catchrat who tried to rape her. Just as her loyalty to her mistresses only serves as prelude to wild attacks, first on the bawd's thigh and belly, second by attacking her new mistress's lover where it hurts, so too does the seeming loyalty to her master, the husband, act as foil to a deeper plan to attack the male gender at the root of their phallic presumption. Together these attacks style Mouse-slayer as a wild cat that targets humans as prey, to punish them for their vanity, their narcissistic coveting of creatures as companionate mirrors to that vanity, and their foolish presumption of the brutishness of cats when all evidence points to the knowing and theatrically complicated inward and secret motions of cats' otherness and collective, gendered subjectivity, motions armed with tooth and claw.

Montaigne tells another cat tale, in his essay on the force of the imagination, a tale of the cat's uncanny powers of attraction through its gaze:

> There was lately scene a cat about my owne house, so earnestly eyeing a bird, sitting upon a tree, that he seeing the Cat, they both so wistly fixed their looks one upon another, so long, that at last, the bird fell downe as dead in the Cats pawes, either drunken by his owne strong imagination, or drawne by some attractive power of the Cat.[27]

This mesmeric power of the cat's predatory gaze correlates to Derrida's parable of his female cat eyeing his genitals rather too closely and in Baldwin's novel is thematised as the witch's soul-shifting into a feline body by possibly 'deluding the sight and fantasies of the séers' – which Streamer likens to his own magic tricks with candlelight seeming to make 'all kinds of head appeer', deceiving 'the right concepcion of the eye, which through the false light receiueth a like forme' (p. 23). Mouse-slayer's eyes have diabolic powers, as we learn in the episode of her besting of the fellow who shoes her with nut shells: she uses the rattling sounds her paws make in the nut-shoes to convince him she is a ghost in the attic: 'I went downward to meet him and made such a ratling, that when hee saw my glistring eyes: he fel down backward, & brake his head crying out ye deuil the deuil, ye deuil'

(p. 73). As one of Baldwin's marginal glosses states: 'A man may dye onely by imagination of harm' (p. 49). The cat's eye manifests as attractive power, and in this novel signifies, too, the erotic dangers of being possessed by the love object that has become hostile and demonic; the eyes in the fake letter from G.S. are the very eyes the merchantman's wife can sense gazing at her as she reads his lament: 'those persing eyes, which by insencible and vnquenchable power inflaming my hart to desire, are so blinde of al mercy' (p. 65). The dangerous mutuality involved when the cat's gaze returns your own, when human and cat fix their looks one upon another, is central to the dangerous and theatrical mystery at work in Baldwin's novel. The novel's secrets are made up of the secrets the cat sees in the privacy of rooms and the darkness of the night, and of the acts of staged and visible violence brought on by the cat's pranks and apish tricks. The piercing gaze of the cat has unquenchable power to speak volumes of the dark nature and theatre revealed by our projections, superstitions, and fears.

Notes

1. William Baldwin, *Beware the Cat* (London: Edward Allde, 1584), p. 3. ProQuest edition https://www-proquest-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/publication/2050274?accountid=13828. I use the page references as given in the Halliwell transcript of the 1584 edition: https://www.presscom.co.uk/halliwell/baldwin/baldwin_1584.html.
2. On the relations between orality and print in Baldwin's novel, see the important discussion in Jennifer Richards, *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance: A New History of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 221–29.
3. Trudy Ko, 'The Hybrid Text: Transformation of the Vernacular in *Beware the Cat*', in Todd Keizer and M. Richardson (eds), *The Transformation of Vernacular Expression in Early Modern Arts* (The Hague: Brill, 2011), 207–228 (p. 223).
4. Rachel Stenner, 'The Act of Penning in William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat*', *Renaissance Studies* 30.3 (2015), pp. 334–49.
5. Cat familiars feature in a 1566 witch trial, cf. the account of John Phillips' 1566 *The Examination and Confession of Certaine Wytches at Chensforde* in Helen Parish, '"Paltrie Vermin, Cats, Mise, Toads, and Weasils": Witches, Familiars, and Human-Animal Interactions in the English Witch Trials', *Religions* 10.2 (2019), 134–48 (p. 140).
6. Cf. Keith Thomas' argument in his *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983) defining cats as pets, i.e. animals that were allowed into the house, given pet names, and never eaten. For the double nature of cats as mousers and as companions in Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland, cf. Kristopher Poole, 'The Contextual Cat: Human-Animal Relations and Social Meaning in Anglo-Saxon England', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 22.3 (September 2015), pp. 857–82 – particularly pp. 871–73.
7. A typical example is when Baldwin follows one marginal gloss 'Our Lady is hired to play the baud. olde women looue their cats' with another: 'the

Image laughed to see the Cat play with her dames beades' (p. 61). The pun on 'play' suggests cats play-acting to create love in their owners.

8. This gaze is thematised as 'piercing eyes […] blind of all mercy' (p. 65) – see the discussion of this trope later in the essay.
9. For a compelling reading of *Beware the Cat* in terms of its night-time setting as zone of non-human jurisdiction and in terms of the sensory powers of cats, see the fourth chapter of Laurie Shannon's *The Accommodated Animal: Cosmopolity in Shakespearean Locales* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
10. E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, transl. Anthea Bell (1822) (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 26.
11. Sarah Koffman, *Autobiogriffures: Du chat Murr d'Hoffmann* (Paris: Editions Galillée, 1984), pp. 74–75 [my translation].
12. See Barrett L. Beer, 'A Critique of the Protectorate: An Unpublished Letter of Sir William Paget to the Duke of Somerset', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 34.3 (1971), pp. 277–83.
13. Barrett L. Beer, 'William Paget and the Protectorate, 1547-1549', *Ohio Academy of History Newsletter*, ii (1971), 2–9 (p. 8).
14. Letter to Protector, 7 July 1549, qu. Beer, 'William Paget', p. 7. Baldwin in the preface to his 1549 *Canticles or Balades of Solomon, phraselyke declared in Englysh metres* describes his book as the stomach of a horse upon which the canticles are printed. Early English Books Online: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A15987.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext. With thanks to Rachel Stenner for this reference.
15. Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', transl. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (Winter, 2002), 369–418 (p. 372).
16. Derrida is referring to Benjamin's discussion, in his 1916 essay 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', of the grieving aphasia of animals caused by their muteness and the wound of being named ('The Animal', p. 388).
17. 'The Animal', p. 380. See the 'psyche' or mirror discussion in the Derrida essay on p. 418.
18. *The Annotated Alice*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 54.
19. Christopher Harrison 1974 thesis at Keele University, *The Social and Economic History of Cannock and Rugeley, 1546–1597*. https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.458354 [Date accessed: 10 August 2021]. He notes that copyholders in Cannock Chase had 'the right of fee commons for their "cattells" within all wastelands, including Cannock Heath and Cannock Wood' (p. 28). Streamer is very angry with those who kill, eat or steal the people's 'cattle' in *Beware the Cat*. See pp. 14, 24–25.
20. David Wood, 'Thinking with Cats (A Response to Derrida)', in in Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco (eds), *Animal Philosophy: Ethics and Identity* (London: Continuum, 2004), 128–144 (p. 139).
21. I follow Charles Adams of the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1869 who transcribed this part of *Beware the* Cat, admired the accuracy of this tale, believing it to be written by an Englishman who had experience of Ireland given the detail of the ways the two men boil their meat and make brogues in the church. Patrik Apore stands for Patrick Power, he states, and he thinks Baldwin makes a mistake to call him a kern as he is clearly an Anglo-Irish landlord at war. Charles Adams, 'Old Irish Words and Deeds', *Dublin University Magazine* 74.441 (September 1869), pp. 324–41.

22. Most clearly revealed in the witch trials of the seventeenth century – cf. Marilyn J. Westerkamp, 'Puritan Patriarchy and the Problem of Revelation', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23.3 (Winter, 1993), pp. 571–95.
23. 'An Apologie of Raymond Sebond', *The Essays of Montaigne*, transl. John Florio, Book II, chapter 12 (1603) (London: David Nutt, 1893), 127–332 (p. 144).
24. *Essais* (1595), edited P. Villey & V. L. Saulnier, vol. 2 (Paris: P. U. F., 1965), p. 182.
25. Stenner, 'The Act of Penning', p. 343.
26. John Desmond Miller, *Beads and Prayers: The Rosary in History and Devotion* (London: Burns & Oates, 2002).
27. 'Of the Force of Imagination', *Essays*, transl. Florio, chapter XX, pp. 139–40.

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