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Dramaturgical boundary crossings in William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* as a text for theatrical adaptation

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* is an already intensely theatrical text, prior to any form of dramatic adaptation. This proposition, and an exploration of how these concerns are subtly and playfully taken up by Babbage, Stenner and O'Connor's 2018 stage adaptation, is the focus of the essay. I anchor my discussion in the logic and discourses of dramaturgical practice and analysis to offer a reading that addresses the role of artifice, spectatorship, materiality, embodiment, textuality and narrative in the work and its interest in the makerly processes through which animal and human identities are constructed, assigned and negotiated. I propose that *Beware the Cat*, in both textual and live form, explores and negotiates three kinds of dramaturgical boundary crossings – between text and performance, between matter and meaning, and between performer and spectator. Overall, I propose that the titular 'beware' acts as a form of *dramaturgical instruction* for working with the text in a live context. I argue that, because Baldwin's original work is so strikingly theatrical in its themes and structure, it offers a set of principles for the *process* of the work's theatrical adaptation as much as it invites a reworking of its content for another form.

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Introduction

In an early passage of William Baldwin's novel *Beware the Cat*, the narrator describes a heated discussion late one night in Master Ferrers' bed chamber on the subject of 'whether birds and beasts ha[ve] reason'. He relates that the debate about the human capacities of animals enjoyed by him and his

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companions was partly sparked by their knowledge of rehearsals for a play: 'the King's Players were learning a play wherein the most part of the actors were birds'. In his opinion, it 'was not comical to make either speechless things to speak or brutish things to common reasonably'.[1] Thus, the possibility of animals with human qualities is mooted and one of the text's foundational themes introduced. That the potentially blurry boundary between human and animal is introduced in reference to a theatrical performance highlights an equally important aspect of Baldwin's exploration of the ontological parameters of these categories, however: the idea that the potential humanness of cats is bound up with processes of creative representation and, indeed, theatrical representation. The question explored by Baldwin's novel is therefore not just whether 'speechless things [can] speak', but the ways in which these phenomena come to be *made*.

In this initial scene, the material conditions in which Streamer's tale of talking cats will take place are vividly recounted. At evening time and likely lit with candles, Ferrers' chamber provides an appropriate stage-like setting for the ensuing story and even has a designated area set out for the 'audience' in the form of a 'pallet cast upon the rushes'.[2] When, moments later, the novel's main narrator, Streamer, takes over, he states that he should under no circumstances be interrupted in his telling of 'such a story'.[3] Following his companions' assurance that they will be a dutiful audience and stay quiet, he, with an apparent actorly confidence, 'turn[s] himself in his bed as [they] might best hear him'.[4] In this way, attention is drawn not only to the nature of the narrative to be shared, but to the material and embodied conditions that surround its telling, including the qualities of the scene and atmosphere, and to the modes of attention and listening taken up by speaker and audience.

Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* focusses thus on the live conditions of storytelling, on the inextricability of words, bodies and subjectivities, and on the makerly processes through which animal and human identities are constructed, assigned and negotiated. The text explores live meaning-making; the way in which it unfolds as a process in the present and how artifice, spectatorship, materiality, embodiment and narrative are interwoven to create individual and shared realities. As a text for stage adaptation, then, this sixteenth-century work contains compelling echoes of the logics and vocabularies of its 'destination' form. Such a concern with processes of live composition means, I argue, that it is an intensely dramaturgical text, in the sense not only that elements of theatricality are apparent in its reading but also that it offers a set of provocations or instructions to those adapting the work for a live context.

This proposition, and an exploration of how these dramaturgical qualities are subtly and playfully built upon in Babbage, O'Connor and Stenner's stage adaptation, are the focus of this essay. Through a discussion

anchored in the logics and discourses of practical theatre making, I offer a dramaturgical reading of the themes of textuality, embodiment and authorship in Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* as a text for theatrical adaptation. I argue that the text explores and negotiates three kinds of dramaturgical boundaries – between text and performance, between matter and meaning, and between performer and spectator – that may be of concern to a potential interpreter and adapter of the text. For each of these, I explore the instructions, invitations and cautions offered by the text and discuss how they are responded to or expanded upon by the 2018 stage adaptation. Overall, I aim to show that, because Baldwin's original work is so strikingly dramaturgical in its themes, structure and approach, it offers a set of principles for the *process* of the work's theatrical adaptation as much as it invites a reworking of its content for another form.

As dramaturgy is a nebulous and polysemic term which may be less familiar to readers outside the theatre discipline, I preface my analysis by briefly setting out here the parameters for the definition I will be working with: a live, compositional process of theatre or performance making. Described as a 'practical philosophy', dramaturgy is the practice of creating relationships and forging connections, whether between text and performance, between the themes within a theatrical production and its wider context, or between the numerous people involved in the business of making and watching theatre.[5] In its sense both as a mode of analysis and practical process of composition, its concern with the relational means that it is intimately caught up with boundary crossings of all kinds.

In their discussion of the internal structure of a theatrical work, Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt argue that meaning can be found, for example, by examining the boundaries between theatrical or performance elements:

> it is the 'links' or the 'bridges' between events that are, in fact, key to understanding the 'inner logic' of the piece. Transitions are not just a question of moving from one moment to another; it is in these transitions that the dramaturgy of a performance is discovered.[6]

The dramaturgy of a work – its composition or 'inner logic' - is therefore defined by the relationship *between* its elements, which are set in dynamic juxtaposition, subject to transition and transformation as they unfold in the space–time of performance.

Eleanor Fuchs, in 'Visit to a Small Planet: some questions to ask a play', echoes a dramaturgical approach based on relationality when she proposes conceiving of a play as if it were a planet or world 'passing before you in time and space', with its own sets of laws, logics and systems.[7] Fuchs warns the observer of such a world against assuming it is like their

own, contending that one should be 'aroused to meaning'.[8] Its secrets and rhythms may not be immediately apparent, she argues, and its anomalies or surprises should not be discounted. In the same way that Turner and Behrndt propose that compositional boundaries are 'key' to understanding the 'inner logic' of a piece, Fuchs argues that negotiating the relationships between elements – and especially looking for connections or synergies that may not immediately reveal themselves - is vital for accessing meaning. '[T]here is nothing in the world of a play by accident', she proposes; in fact, '*[t]he puzzles may hold the key*' (italics in the original).[9] In exploring the three forms of dramaturgical boundary crossing I have identified in *Beware the Cat* (both in its textual and live form) - text to performance, matter to meaning, performer to spectator – I hope to look to these transitions to discover its 'inner logic'. I argue that by attending to the strangeness of Baldwin's text and contemplating its 'puzzles', an understanding of its nature as a text for live adaptation can be unlocked.

My own relationship to *Beware the Cat*, in its 2018 stage adaptation form, is as a marginal figure. I worked as one of three 'cats', deployed as ushers, tending to the audience in the interval with refreshments, circling the main performance space and sometimes weaving through the crowd. I was present in some rehearsals but never strayed far from the side-lines. In this way, I view and interpret the work neither from the inside nor the outside but stand somewhere on the boundary line between performer and audience, between inside knowledge and spontaneous encounter. In offering an analysis of *Beware the Cat* from this standpoint, I aim to respond to Turner, Behrndt and Fuchs' invitations to remain alert to the unique interpretive affordances of crossing places and locate a 'key' to the piece at the meeting point of its live and textual manifestations.[10]

Ontological uncertainty

A sense of ontological uncertainty and fluidity - of not knowing quite what a thing is – is a recurring theme in Baldwin's text. As the story unfolds, the reader or listener encounters cats who possess mysterious qualities, who 'understand and speak, have a governor among themselves, and [are] obedient to their [own] laws'.[11] There are talking cats, cats with astonishing appetites, cats who might be devils, cats wearing shoes and cats violently attacking their masters: in other words, cats whose actions deeply unsettle any ordinary understanding of 'cat'. The title *Beware the Cat*, with its definite article, implies a fixity to the category of 'cat' that is belied by the myriad strange feline-related happenings recounted by the story's narrator. Taken together, these episodes do not offer the reader any neat

conclusions or overarching insights into the motivations of cats or any knowable principles of feline experience. Rather, each story reinforces the unpredictability of these creatures and worries the definitional boundaries of 'cat'.

In a narrative recounted by Master Streamer, for example, a 'kern called Patrick Apore' has an uncanny encounter with a feline.[12] Having murdered several people and stolen a cow and a sheep, the thief and his accomplice hide in a nearby church. Growing hungry, they kill the sheep and roast it on a fire. A cat comes by, seemingly lured by the smell, and, to their surprise, asks in Irish for them to 'give [her] some meat'.[13] Fearing the presence of the devil, the kern proceeds to feed her the entire sheep and cow, which she gobbles up without hesitation. The thief flees, only to find the cat sitting behind him on his horse. Horrified, he kills her with his 'dart', which in turn incites a revengeful group of felines to appear who murder and eat his young companion.[14]

In this episode, the ontological boundaries that contain what we – and, indeed, Patrick Apore - know about cats are sent into disarray. The fact that the cat's physical form does not change - we would expect it to be grossly distended if she were to eat such an amount – only adds to the strangeness. In this way, the animal body that can absorb unlimited food, although untransformed in a physical sense, stands in for the creature's ontological capaciousness. This cat transgresses the boundary that separates the ordinary, predictable world and the shadowy places of an altogether stranger realm.

The blurring of the definitional boundaries of 'cat' is a recurrent theme in Baldwin's work. Such a lack of ontological fixity means that people are frequently outwitted, deceived, bewildered and frightened by cats, who prove themselves to be elusive, self-governing, self-defining and resistant to subjection. This fluidity, as we shall see, offers a useful jumping off point for considering the latent dramaturgical tendencies of *Beware the Cat*: the insights offered by the text on the crossings between text and performance, between matter and meaning, and between performer and spectator emerge from the figure of the cat in its role as an elusive and unpredictable agent.

Beware the text: between text and performance

The premiere of the 2018 live adaptation of Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* took place at that year's Festival of the Mind, the University of Sheffield's public engagement festival in which academics share their research with the public. As the performance begins, Frances Babbage, Bob McKay, Bill McDonnell and Robyn Orfitelli – the performers, all academics from the University's School of English – are seated in a panel configuration

reminiscent of a conference or formal presentation. Before them are glasses of water and copies of the script, and behind them is a projector screen. Although the various cats in the story will never physically appear on stage, the screen will display a series of projected illustrations of cats drawn by Penny McCarthy, and the performance will include dramatic embellishments in the form of large cards imprinted with marginalia held aloft, singing, music, and ushers with cat ears giving out treats during the interlude.

Surrounded by the paraphernalia of textual study and interpretation, the people on stage in the opening scene appear to be set for the imparting of scholarly knowledge, for a demonstration of intellectual enquiry. Babbage informs us that the 'tale will pass from one speaker to another'.[15] This is useful information for the audience in terms of what is to come, but also acts as a reference to academic mastery – given the context, the presence of these individuals connotes a casually confident relationship with the material, an implicit promise that they will pass the subject matter deftly between them as easily as passing the physical script. As the performance unfolds, however, this promise of a masterful relationship with the text is gently subverted: in the same way that 'the cat' is a shifting, fragmented and multi-faceted being in the source text, so too is it in the live version. The projections that initially seemed set to expand on the events of the story at any given moment turn out to have a rhythm and timeline of their own, echoing but not corresponding to the action that is described by the speakers. The marginal glosses from the text, which appear as cards held up by McKay, and which in theory

could provide useful reference points, do not necessarily give any further sense of what 'the cat' might be. The silent 'cats', or ushers, who interact with the audience during the intermission reveal equally little.

All these visual and material elements, although feline-related, are slightly discordant with the unfolding story. Where or what 'the cat' might be remains elusive as the narrative progresses, and, on account of this discordancy, the authority of the four performer-academics comes to seem less reliable than it did initially. The live piece delicately treads the line between a dramatisation and a live reading, refusing to fall neatly into either camp. A question hangs in the air: is this the reading of a text or is it a performance? The audience, who have been instructed by the title and by the on-stage speakers to remain alert to feline presence, increasingly find that the tantalising hints of the presence of cats mean that both the answer to this question, and any direct, theatrically-rendered encounter with a cat, are ultimately out of reach.

In this way, the 2018 performance takes a dramaturgical cue from the original text and works the view of cats as possessing a mysterious, unpredictable agency into its dramaturgy. The on-stage elements – spoken text, written text, pictures, sound, interaction – do not offer a singular, coherent view, but, like the original text, comprise a multi-layered representation of the subject matter. That the dramaturgy takes this form thus communicates the themes of the source text to the audience, but it also references the relationship between text and performance that is negotiated within the process of adaptation. The possibility that the text is something to be mastered – a situation seemingly promised by the

opening scene of the live version - is undermined by both the themes of subversion found in Baldwin's work and the unfolding dramaturgy of the performance itself.

As Linda Hutcheon outlines, adaptations involve a translation or 'transcoding' of a work in one form (for example, a book) and into another (for example, a film).[16] Such a shift across forms, she explains, equates to a movement from a mode of telling into a mode of showing:

> to tell a story, as in novels, short stories, and even historical accounts, is to describe, explain, summarize, expand […]. To show a story, as in movies, ballets, radio and stage plays, musicals and operas, involves direct aural and usually visual performance experienced in real time.[17]

Adaptation of this kind thus involves a form of boundary crossing between a world dictated by visual and aural logics and a world dictated around textual, conceptual and interpretive ones. The work of adaptation suggests a one-time crossing, typically from telling and into showing. In the case of *Beware the Cat*, however, the dramaturgical elements of the original text and the textual elements of its live presentation mean that the realms of showing - of performance - and telling - of text - are inextricably linked and the crossings made between them repeatedly staged. Far from performing a straightforward, unidirectional boundary crossing from text to performance, the live version of *Beware the Cat* interrogates and unsettles that line.

The idea that the text is not an end point, a finished narrative, but is an invitation – extended to readers and theatre makers alike – to take a subsequent step to realise the text in one of multiple ways is echoed by Baldwin's original work. Although not *per se* a dramatic text, *Beware the Cat* was written to be read aloud.[18] Implicit in this intention is the idea that the text, by itself, is only part of the story: at the point where the text and the live moment of telling coincide, the 'novel' takes on a fuller, more multifaceted identity. The themes of unpredictability and ontological uncertainty explored by Baldwin in relation the figure of the cat, as well as the fragmentary, episodic structure of the work, reinforce this invitation. In this way, both the reader and potential adaptor encounter the text as a call to respond, to create something new, something live, and something to be experienced through the body and through the senses.

Babbage, Stenner and O'Connor's adaptation responds to this invitation. As such, Babbage's explanation that the 'tale will pass from one speaker to another' can be interpreted not as an indication of the text as a thing to be passed around, but as something that itself passes through each speaker.[19] Like the cat, the text might be seen to move with a volition or agency of its own, as a non-human actor on stage. The instruction 'beware the cat', read dramaturgically, thus is a call to acknowledge textual source material

as (a)live, dynamic, unpredictable, not fully knowable, a caution against ascribing fixity or familiarity to an addressed subject matter. Texts, Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* seems to suggest, are living things that are other than human - something to tend to and attune to but also something of which to be wary, to approach with caution. For the adaptor specifically, *Beware the Cat* thus implicitly offers a set of principles for the adaptation process. The cautionary 'beware the cat' in the title acts as a form of dramaturgical or adaptation-related instruction for handling the narrative. The text, with its cat-like qualities, is not inert, but a living thing with the capacity to surprise and elude and to act in strange and unpredictable ways.

The theme of ontological uncertainty I have identified in Baldwin's original text thus links together two forms of boundary crossings: from human to animal and from text to performance. Baldwin explores the figure of the cat in relation to its mysterious human (and more-than-human) qualities, thereby mooting the possibility of an unfixed boundary between animal and human. This lack of fixity, he shows, poses a risk: in situations where cats possess human qualities, anything can happen. Similarly, the latent dramaturgical invitation to embody the text in one of multiple ways that is found in the original work can be seen as a playful incitement to live happenings. The subtle resistance to the possibility of textual mastery and the ambiguous formal identity of the 2018 adaptation – neither fully text nor fully performance – evidences the taking up of this cue and demonstrates the careful crafting of a dramaturgy whose 'inner logic' echoes that of its source text.[20]

Beware 'the Cat': between matter and meaning

One striking image shores up the inextricability of the textual and the embodied realms in Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* – that of the gruesome sight of 'quarters of men […] stand[ing] upon poles', observable by anyone crossing the threshold of the printing house.[21] This is an almost literal example of a boundary crossing – 'as you enter in' – between the fleshy outside world of matter and the interior, abstract world of textuality and semioticity.[22] In the same way that Baldwin's text alone represents an unfinished version of the story – to be literally 'fleshed' out by reading it aloud or adapting it for the stage – the dismembered parts on poles are a meaty reminder that, in the world of *Beware the Cat*, words cannot be separated from bodies.

This duality is not just an insight offered to the reader or listener by the text, however. The way in which matter and meaning interact, and the relationship this has with the spectator, are foundational to Baldwin's work. Returning to the story of the 'King's Players' related by the narrator, we hear that 'the most part of the actors were birds'.[23] This comedic line potentially summons an image of a group of male actors looking preposterous in feathered outfits. The joke relies on the fact that the actors probably looked or sounded nothing like birds. And yet, in the logic of performance and its processes of signification, they *are*, at least partly, birds: the spectator who sees a man in a feathered outfit implicitly responds to the invitation to see a particular kind of creature, even though, in reality, it is not there.

That this kind of spectatorial negotiation is a dramaturgical concern – in that it relates to the compositional processes used by theatre makers to construct meaning on stage – is explored by Stephen Bottoms in his analysis of the work of playwright and performer Tim Crouch. Discussing the playful manipulation of materials and their semiotic categories, he proposes that.

> theatre's distinctive qualities as a medium reside in its being inherently metaphorical- […] it works less by visual resemblance than by inviting us to see one set of things […] in terms of another.[24]

In this statement, Bottoms draws attention to the way in which an audience engages in a live, subjective compositional process when watching and interpreting what they see on stage. In Crouch's *An Oak Tree*, for example, the audience are invited to understand a piano stool as a tree.[25] The object they see, in the logic of the theatre, is both a tree *and* a piano stool, just as the King's Players are both men *and* birds. In this case, as Turner and Behrndt propose, the connections or transitions between elements are key to understanding: meanings arise from the relationship between them.[26] Following Bottoms, the textual and material realms in Baldwin's text are not just inextricable, their dynamic interplay is central to the construction of meaning and progress of the narrative. In the 'King's Players' anecdote, the ontological status of observed phenomena is

reliant on spectators' willingness to 'buy in' to a specific relationship between matter and meaning, and this is a recurrent theme in *Beware the Cat*. The cat Mouse-slayer, for example, tells a humorous anecdote about how she played a central role in a deception staged by 'an old gentlewoman, a widow' with whom she lived.[27] The aim of the plot is to manipulate a young woman into giving in to the sexual advances of one of the gentlewoman's young lodgers. The unsuspecting victim is invited to dinner, and, unaware that her hostess has fed pudding laced with mustard to Mouse-slayer and blown pepper up her nose, enquires why the cat is sneezing and crying. The gentlewoman explains that her only daughter had been transformed into a cat in retribution for resisting her admirer's sexual advances and, since then, has 'been continually weeping, and lamenting her wretchedness'.[28] Succumbing to this carefully constructed fiction, the woman is so frightened that the same will happen to her that she acquiesces to the lustful young man.

In this story, the young woman is deceived by a carefully constructed and stage-managed performance in which the relationship between materiality and semioticity plays a key role. In dramaturgical terms, the gentlewoman might be understood as the author of the scene and the victim as the audience; Mouse-slayer plays a character, as does the author herself, and various props are used to aid the fiction. The crux of the deception, however, is in the relationship between the story told by the gentlewoman and the physical body of the weeping cat that the young woman observes. As a consequence of the words spoken by the gentlewoman, the cat adopts a new identity in the eyes of the observer, who believes a human has shape-shifted to animal form. As readers or listeners of the story, however, we know that this transformation is not magic, but has been constructed.

As in numerous other examples in Baldwin's *Beware the Cat*, shapeshifting – which of course leads to ontological uncertainty - is *performed or assigned* and is reliant on the contexts of observation and authorship. The title of the work suggests a singular, definable, fixed entity – 'the cat' - but this belies the multiple expressions, investigations and approaches to 'the cat' that are contained within the piece. Just as the image of the King's Players suggests multiple identities - humans, birds, human-birds – so too does the text present multiple and shifting human and non-human selves. This fluidity is linked to materiality, embodiment and spectatorship: both concepts and bodies are consistently in flux.

The performance adaptation of *Beware the Cat* plays with the relationship between the semiotic and the material in order to construct meaning, and, in doing so, takes a cue from Baldwin's original text. In the premiere, as mentioned, there were three 'cats' who tended to the audience, as ushers; subsequent productions of the piece have continued to make use of this device. At the interlude they give out a 'lozenge' – clearly a boiled sweet – and some 'potion' – clearly a shot of pop – that feature in a story about Master Streamer

witnessing a meeting of cats. In offering them this small sugary intake in place of items from the narrative, the audience is invited into the fantasy. Spectators may waver a little because they are unsure what the 'potion' actually contains and the silent 'cat' does not explain: the fantasy must be negotiated as the audience member judges the relationship between the objects from the story and the actual things in front of them. The props here, the sweet and the pop, reveal their own shapeshifting properties in the context of theatrical storytelling: they are both the lozenge and potion from the story *and* a boiled sweet and shot of pop. The effect of this technique - of playing with a potential mismatch between the narrative and the visual and material elements being used on stage - has the effect of drawing attention to the performance as a live mode of construction in the manner set out by Bottoms.[29]

In a similar fashion and in the opening scene, Babbage explains that the story begins with its author, William Baldwin, and then turns, deadpan, to her co-performer Bob McKay to say 'Bob, that's you'.[30] Babbage's remark invites the audience to understand the man on stage via at least three interconnected identities: McKay as the author William Baldwin, McKay as onstage persona 'Bob', and McKay as himself, the performer. The three versions of Bob exist in metaphorical relationship – McKay does not visually evoke William Baldwin so much as he stands in for him. In this way, the early line 'Bob, that's you' clearly acknowledges the metaphorical relationships at work here and in the rest of the piece to come. Thus, Babbage's comment both undermines the potentially authoritative role of professional researchers, as previously noted, and also draws attention to the fundamental nature of the live event, with its own real-time processes of signification.

In the context of the live adaptation then, and taking its cue from the original text as I have discussed, the material and embodied identity of the performance subtly counteracts the textual narrative. The textual and abstract realms work in dynamic relation with the material and embodied ones, asking us, in Bottoms' words, 'to see one set of things […] in terms of another.[31] Returning to the idea that the 'inner logic' of a piece can be found in the transitions and relationships within a composition, this tension and complementarity between embodiment and idea can be understood as foundational in Baldwin's work. The figure of the cat both on stage and in the narrative, as a non-human actor whose physical and ontological boundaries are constantly in flux, most fully encapsulates this tension. Reading this theme in terms of dramaturgical instruction, the eponymous warning 'beware the cat' can thus be understood as an adaptor's note to interrogate the boundaries of 'the cat', not just in a conceptual, semiotic or textual sense but in an embodied, sensory and live one and to consider the provisional and shifting relationships between these multiple realms.

Beware the author: between performer and spectator

In my exploration of the relationships between text, performance, matter and meaning in Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* and the 2018 stage adaptation, I have implicitly evoked the role of the spectator as a fundamental part of the co-creation of meaning and of the category 'cat'. In the example of the young woman's deception by an old gentlewoman and her cat, Mouse-slayer, I suggested that the 'audience' in that scene is the young woman. She is a spectator in the sense that the fiction is acted upon her: the gentlewoman constructs a narrative for her consumption. Although she is an active

rather than passive spectator – she acquiesces to her admirer's advances because of the fiction – she does not occupy an equal role in the construction of the scene because she has been duped. There is no mutual negotiation between the 'author' of the fiction and the 'spectator'.

Elsewhere in Baldwin's text, however, the way in which meaning is co-constructed – the authorial aspects of spectatorship – are explored. The cat Mouse-slayer tells a story about having walnut shells forcibly stuck to her feet by an 'ungracious fellow' living in the house of her mistress.[32] The loud noise that the 'shoes' make wakes the entire household in the middle of the night. Hearing the noise and seeing her 'glistering eyes', they mistake Mouse-slayer for the devil.[33] Crying out and running from the house in various states of undress, they enlist the help of a priest. This solution is to no avail as, in a truly comical scene, they see the cat once more and, in their terror, end up lying together in a heap with the priest's face buried in a boy's 'bare arse'.[34] When Mouse-slayer affectionately approaches her mistress, both her true identity and the misunderstanding are revealed. In this episode, the frightened householders are cast in the role of spectators, the inadvertent consumers of an illusionary fiction. These individuals emerge as if from a dream: Mouse-slayer explains that 'came every man to himself and arose and looked upon me'.[35] In a gesture of compassion, they get 'hot water and dissolve[e] the pitch and pluck [..] off' the cat's 'shoes', but, crucially, this act is also a way for them to physically dismantle the illusion that once had held power over them, to play a proactive part in its disappearance.[36] Their investment in its disappearance shores up their role not just as spectators, but as witnesses: they agree not to talk about this shameful episode; 'every man, after they desired each other not to be a-known of this night's work, for shame departed to their lodgings', explains Mouse-slayer.[37] That the events of the night exist now only in their minds further strengthens the text's concern with the conditions of live performance, which as Peggy Phelan famously has noted, is defined by its capacity to disappear, its only trace existing in the minds of those who experienced it.[38]

The theme of spectatorship as a form witnessing that which is subject to disappearance – of the unique affordances bestowed upon the spectating body situated in place and time - is explored further in an episode in which Master Streamer observes a strange gathering of cats.[39] He describes how the felines are seemingly deep in debate, noting how 'one cat, a mighty big one, grey-haired and bristle-bearded', sat in the middle, while others sat around, apparently listening and then responding.[40] Although he cannot understand what they are saying, he is sure he is witnessing a cat version of a public assembly and this leads to an extraordinary spectatorial experience for him. He looks through a darkened window and this situation places Master Streamer firmly in the role of spectator in this scene: like an audience member in a traditional theatre, he sits in the dark, seeing without being seen.

He is, however, far from a passive observer. From the start, as he relates the story, he is deeply engaged in attempting to interpret what he sees. He narrates to his listeners in the bed chamber how, although he can hear much 'groaning', 'crying' and 'shrieking', he intuits that 'it might well be counted as a harmony'.[41] Although he cannot understand the 'words', he begins to make sense of the meaning of the performance through interpretation of gestures, differences in sounds and the apparent relationships between the observed feline characters. He notes, for example, that, at one point, 'this mewing cat began again, as if it were making 'beisance to them which sat'.[42]

Frustrated by his inability to understand the full meaning of the cats' gathering and propelled by his hunch that the performance holds a truth to which he currently has limited access, Streamer sets out to change something in himself, as observer. He creates a 'philtre' made from distilled animal parts and a 'lozenge' made from cat's dung and tongues. He pays specific attention to the 'tongues and ears' of the woodland animals he has killed, drying them out and turning them into two 'little pillows'.[43] On drinking the potion, eating the lozenge and attaching the 'pillows' to his own ears, he acquires extraordinary powers of hearing, now tuning in to a previously inaccessible, multi-textured world of sound. Returning the following night to the cat assembly, he can understand perfectly what is said, 'as well as if [it had been] English'.[44] Streamer's powers are temporary, however: the night after that he encounters two cats, apparently in discussion, but 'understood never a word'.[45]

The role of the embodied and active audience – and especially the idea of attending physically and mentally in the right way, or risk misunderstanding - is thus positioned as a central theme in *Beware the Cat*. The cat assembly scene draws attention to the acts of seeing and hearing that are fundamental to theatrical or performance-based modes of expression. To see and hear more accurately, Streamer seeks a transformation in his own body by ingesting parts of animal bodies and he is particularly interested in eyes and ears, the organs of listening and speaking and, of course, of theatricality, in the sense that the Latin root of 'audience' is 'audire', 'to hear'. The narrator's experience suggests strongly that spectatorship is an embodied business, that the connections or transitions between the numerous elements of theatrical composition, are made through a subjective and active process of interpretation undertaken by the spectator. The temporary nature of his heightened senses draws further attention to his role as witness to live, disappearing events: the companions listening to Streamer's story only have his word for it, which, as he points out, introduces doubt as to the veracity of his story.[46] The strange goings on were accessible solely to those physically in attendance and, after the fact, are replaced only by descriptions that ultimately fall short in communicating that which took place.

Returning to Fuchs' concept of dramaturgical reading as an encounter with another world that is 'passing before you in time and space' and

drawing on Streamer's intuition that what he witnesses is more than the non-sensical cacophony that his ears at first hear, his story acts as a confrontation with a boundary between worlds.[47] That he looks through a darkened window is highly significant: it is a threshold between realms, one of which is familiar and knowable, and one of which is strange and obscured. Fuchs cautions, as noted, that in other-worldly encounters, 'the puzzles may hold the key', and, in doing so, proposes that an observer or spectator must approach the task of interpretation from a starting point of not-knowing, must pay specific attention to sensory and material aspects and should be particularly willing to attend to any gaps and slippages. Following this, and in the context of the cat assembly episode, that which is non-sensical can be reinterpreted as that which is governed by an obscure logic.[48] When faced with something he does not understand, Streamer seeks a change in himself and thereby acknowledges that cat-world logic cannot be accounted for by human-world logic.

As I have suggested, Streamer's approach to spectatorship is active and embodied, and, in this way, he fulfils Fuchs' call. Indeed, his observation of the scene pertains to a dramaturgical approach, in that he attempts to find connections, resonances and 'bridges' between the numerous elements, even while their individual meanings are unclear.[49] In doing so, he is compelled to take an active role as co-author of the meanings unfolding in the performance space before him. This action, along with his impulse to merge physically with the source of meaning through the ingestion of animal body parts, means that the boundary between author and spectator is blurred: meaning in this scene does not have a single, authorial source, but emerges from a dynamic relation between performers and audience and is reliant on embodied and conceptual strategies of subjective interpretation.

Thus, Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* treats the theme of single authorship with caution, not just through the unreliability of its narrator – who offers no proof of his fantastical experiences – but in the way in which meanings in individual scenes are tied to the ebb and flow of shared realities and are reliant on subjective interpretation. 'Beware the cat' as dramaturgical instruction might therefore also point to the importance of the role of spectatorship and subjective interpretation in any theatrical rendition of the work, a reminder that the figure of the cat is subject to continual recasting in the eyes and mind of the viewer. The aspects of the 2018 live adaptation that I have explored in this essay – the subtle resistance to textual mastery, the ambiguity over the piece's identity as text or performance and the weave of the various material elements to hint at but never fully reveal the figure of the cat – together can be understood as an opening up of a shared reality in which the audience are invited to make their own meanings, to negotiate their own connections between elements in order to access the 'inner logic' of the piece.[50]

Such an opening up, driven by the impulse to invite the audience into the task of co-constructing meaning, poses a question about the responsibilities of creating stage fictions. Returning to the narrator's hesitancy in the opening scene of the piece about making 'speechless things to speak', an author figure who is sensitive in her decision-making and cognisant of her power is evoked.[51] This quote touches on the choices that authors, theatre-makers and performers might make and the potential power they have in creating theatrical representations. It expresses the deliberation or anxiety they might feel when contemplating whether to 'give life' to something and the range of creative anxieties and ethical pitfalls that accompany decisions about what to render – or not – on stage. The word 'make' has a multi-faceted resonance here, since it highlights the importance of artistic choice, but also the potentially powerful, even coercive aspects of authorship that are explored in Baldwin's *Beware the Cat*: to 'make speechless things to speak' may be an unwelcome act of control or dominance as much as an inspired and creative gesture. Indeed, as the scenes where Mouse-slayer is mistaken for the devil and for a weeping woman show, much is at stake in performance-based modes of illusion and deception. Stage-based fictions hold a peculiar power, especially where spectators 'buy in' to an offered version of reality. In this way, a final dramaturgical instruction identifiable in Baldwin's text – and one taken up by Babbage, O'Conner and Stenner's 2018 adaptation with sensitivity and playfulness – might be a request to carefully consider both the power and fallibility of the authorial voice, and its dynamic relationship with collectively constructed realities and attendant spectators.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show the ways in which Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* offers up certain dramaturgical provocations or instructions and how Babbage, O'Connor and Stenner's stage adaptation responded to and elaborated upon those concerns. Having identified dramaturgy as a theory and practice involving boundary crossings of all kinds, I explored three interrelated forms of dramaturgical boundary crossings in the original text: the movement between textual worlds and performance-based ones, the movement between words, concepts and bodies and the movement between modes of spectatorship and authorship. Each of these crossings, I argued, can be understood as a form of dramaturgical instruction arising in the original text, a call for the potential adaptor to acknowledge the already intensely theatrical qualities of its unfolding scenes and multi-layered narratives and to consider how these qualities might be reflected on stage.

I began by referencing the early scene in Master Ferrers' bed chamber, and the narrator's doubt about '*make[ing]* [..] speechless things to speak' (my italics). Master Ferrers and his companions discuss whether or not cats make 'natural kindly actions'; the question they are concerned with is 'what makes a being act?'[52] With its repeated references to illusion, deception and collectively (mis)understood realities, and its ambivalent attitude to authorship, *Beware the Cat* offers no straightforward answer to this question. What is unequivocal in Baldwin's text, however, is that animal and human actions have a complex and interdependent relationship with whomever is watching and are intimately tied up with the uniquely provisional and disappearing nature of live events.

Sounding a little like an entry in an animal encyclopaedia, Baldwin's title suggests 'the cat' as a normative category that can be used to identify and ascribe meaning to all individual instances of cats. Yet his text, with its multivalent and provisional presentation of felines, undermines this eponymous promise. Understood as a dramaturgical instruction, 'beware the cat' calls on the reader and adaptor alike to acknowledge that the category of 'cat' is not universal but is reliant on specific semiotic and material contexts and on modes of spectatorship and authorship. Understood in this way, *Beware the Cat* in its original form echoes the concerns and explorations of many contemporary performance makers and scholars, despite its nearly five-hundred-year-old status and not being a dramatic text *per se*. Indeed, the dramaturgical cautions and invitations in Baldwin's work in an overall sense are a reminder that the best creative works are alive and in process, and that formal, textual, sensory and ontological boundary crossings represent some of the most generative and disarming sites of creation and realisation. As both readers and potential analysers, interpreters or adaptors, we must approach compositions with excited and expectant caution, with our bodies as well as our minds, and ensure that we remain 'aroused to meaning'.[53]

Notes

1. *Beware the Cat*, adapted for performance by Frances Babbage, Terry O'Connor, and Rachel Stenner (2018), p.1. All quotations from the play refer to this version.
2. *Beware the Cat*, p.1.
3. *Beware the Cat*, p.3.
4. *Beware the Cat*, p.3.
5. Michael M Chemers, *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010) p. 3.
6. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, p. 33.
7. Fuchs, 'Planet', p.5, 6.
8. Fuchs, 'Planet', p. 9.
9. Fuchs, 'Planet', p. 9.
10. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy*, p. 33 and Fuchs, 'Planet', p. 9.
11. *Beware the Cat*, p.23.
12. *Beware the Cat*, p.5.
13. *Beware the Cat*, p.5.
14. *Beware the Cat*, p.5.
15. *Beware the Cat*, p.1.
16. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, (London: Routledge, 2013) p.17.
17. Hutcheon, *Adaptation*, p. 13.
18. Jennifer Richards, *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 229.
19. *Beware the Cat*, p.1.
20. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy*, p. 33.
21. *Beware the Cat*, p.3.
22. *Beware the Cat*, p.3.

23. *Beware the Cat*, p.1.
24. Stephen Bottoms, 'Introduction' in *Tim Crouch: Plays One* (London: Oberon, 2011), p. 14.
25. Tim Crouch, An Oak Tree, in *Plays One: The Author; England; An Oak Tree; My Arm* (London: Oberon, 2011).
26. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy*, p. 33.
27. *Beware the Cat*, p.17.
28. *Beware the Cat*, p.18.
29. Stephen Bottoms, 'Introduction', (London: Oberon, 2011), p. 14.
30. *Beware the Cat*, p.1.
31. Stephen Bottoms, 'Introduction', (London: Oberon, 2011), p. 14.
32. *Beware the Cat*, p. 20.
33. *Beware the Cat*, p.20.
34. *Beware the Cat*, p.21.
35. *Beware the Cat*, p.21.
36. *Beware the Cat*, p.21.
37. *Beware the Cat*, p.21.
38. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*: *The Politics of Performance*, (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 146.
39. *Beware the Cat*, p.10.
40. *Beware the Cat*, p.10.
41. *Beware the Cat*, p.10.
42. *Beware the Cat*, p.10.
43. *Beware the Cat*, p.1.
44. *Beware the Cat*, p.15.
45. *Beware the Cat*, p.23.
46. *Beware the Cat*, p. 23.
47. Fuchs, 'Planet', p.6.
48. Fuchs, 'Planet', p.9.
49. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy*, p. 33.
50. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy*, p. 33.
51. *Beware the Cat*, p.1.
52. *Beware the Cat*, p.1.
53. Fuchs, 'Planet', p.9.

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