Storyteller or Speaking Cat, Predator or Prey — Substantiating the Idea of Beasts and Fowls' Use of Reason and Language in *Beware the Cat* and Other Early Modern Writings.

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Storyteller or Speaking Cat, Predator or Prey — Substantiating the Idea of Beasts and Fowls' Use of Reason and Language in *Beware the Cat* and Other Early Modern Writings.

Florence Krésine

Katze und Maus.

Würzburg. Germanisches Nationalmuseum.
Deutschland um 1500. Papier (Blatt).
25,1x35,7 cm.¹

William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* is often considered to be the first English novel. It was written in 1553, first published in a 1561 revised version now lost, after Mary I's death. The subsequent editions date to 1570, and then to 1584. The story related by G.B., the first-person narrator, treats of the extraordinary proposition of an existing speech among cats.² The scene takes place on the first night during which Gregory Streamer seems to find himself in the house of the Protestant printer, John Day, in London. He is engaged in a serious conversation on how he once was spying on a cat community, striving to understand their language and capture the spirit of 'cathood'. The embedded narrative structure of *Beware the Cat* at once multiplies and disseminates stories in a nightmarish textual space in which human storytellers and talking cats are shown as predators or prey.

Other 16th century texts used as material in this paper can be defined as plays, beast epics, poems, pamphlets, or tracts... Those stories are principally John Still or William Stevenson's *Gammar Gurton's Needle* (1575),³ considered the first English play by some, Edmund Spenser's *Prosopopoia Or Mother Hubberds Tale* (1591), Thomas Lodge's *Catharos. Diogenes in his singulartie* (1591), John Baxter's *A Toile for Two-Legged Foxes* (1600), and Peter Woodhouse's *Democritus his Dreame. Or, The contention betweene the elephant and the flea* (1605).

In an essay entitled *Traduire le parler des bêtes*, Élisabeth de Fontenay asserts that the dividing line is between those who talk about beasts and those who have

anthropomorphic beasts talk, tell stories, and expound ideas and opinions.⁴ She is clearly partial to those who fit into the first category.

I first intend to give substantial evidence that knowledge on animals is explicitly or implicitly part of the bloodstream of the text and helps meaning circulate throughout those stories. It will bring me to give a closer scrutiny to the shift from the assumption of man as the rational “story-telling animal” to the playful experimental display of animal rational thinking and linguistic skills.⁵ Finally, I will focus on the experience of metamorphosis and transubstantiation through the ironical misappropriation of Catholic rituals.

Talking about beasts – constructing the idea of animal life through a broad base of knowledge and erudition.

The dialogue between the first-person narrator, William Baldwin, and Gregory Streamer, a priest, is based on the opposition between knowledge and practical experience. Indeed, in the dialogue between Streamer and Baldwin, Baldwin first takes sides against him, referring to the “authoritie of most grave and learned philosophers”⁶.

The broad base of knowledge found in this essay finds its roots in Pliny’s *Natural History*, Aristotle’s works, notably *History of Animals* or *Parts of Animals*, and *On the Soul*, but also Albertus Magnus’s *On Animals* and *The Book of Secrets* or *Secrets of the Virtues of Herbs, Stones and certain Beasts*, (written not by Albert the Great, but probably by one of his followers), alongside with Edward Topsell’s *Four-footed Beasts*. Aristotle’s *History of Animals* insists on describing common traits through observation and its method is to have recourse to a taxonomy with the various elements fitting into different categories.

Albert the Great’s description of the cat includes a definition that associates the feline with its prey, as in Baldwin’s story, the names of the female Mouse-Slayer, and the male Catchrat. Indeed, the cat is an animal named for its ability to capture (*capiendo*). But the reference to Albert the Great in Baldwin’s story allows to introduce some of the magic in *The Book of Secrets*. Books of secrets were compilations of technical and medicinal recipes and magic formulæ that began to be printed in the 16th century. The raw material linked with knowledge of animals through eyewitness observation is often related to animals’ parts. For example, cats’ eyes are seen “shining and radiant in the dark” in Pliny;⁷ Aristotle draws our attention to “the sparkling in cats’ eyes and wolves’ eyes seen in the dark and not in the light”;⁸ and Albert the Great shows cats having “eyes that glow like coal in the night”.⁹ In one of Mouse-slayer’s rather comical episode in the narrative of her life story, her eyes are a disruptive element that suggests devilry. The play *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* introduces a cat named Gib, whose eyes also shine in the dark like a spark of fire. In both cases, the perfectly stereotyped image of a cat’s shining eyes in the dark serves to emphasize the Aristotelian rational attitude to beasts, and ridicule those who are victims of their own fears and superstition. In reality, cats were often perceived as witches’ familiars, and in Baldwin’s *Beware the Cat*, they are naturally divided into two categories, “unnatural” “devils cats” as opposed to “natural cats”.¹⁰

According to Aristotle, the tail is the monkey's distinctive trait, but its body bears a strong resemblance to man's body. Pliny's *Natural History* also brings out the importance of the tail and the ape's kinship with man when he states that apes are distinguished from each other by the tail.¹¹ At the end of Spenser's beast poem, the Fox, who is more cunning and resourceful, is seen fleeing the land in time before chastisement, but the ape's long tail is cut off and all apes will from now on be bereft of their tail as they failed to set an example and proved to be man's nearest kin but on account of their foolish behaviour.¹² Beryl Rowland's *Blind Beasts* expounds the idea that "the tailless posterior of the ape was therefore regarded as an indication of *hubris*, of pride, and of the animal's desire to aspire beyond its station".¹³ Moreover, In *Beware the cat*, the tail of the dead fox used for the recipe is likened to the tail of the devil.¹⁴ As Streamer is starting to attend the meeting, Mouse-slayer's tail is used for curtesy and she starts her "breefe talk" in a graceful and dignified manner : "who in her lāguage after y^e with her taile shée had made curtseie".¹⁵

In each case, the same process is at work. This close-up on one of the permanent heterogeneous parts of animals' anatomy, emphasized in Aristotle's *Parts of Animals*, has a far more complex meaning and serves the writer's satiric purpose.¹⁶

Rebecca Ann Bach argues that "in the Renaissance it was customary, not novel or suspect to regard most creatures as having morals, emotions, and even reason".¹⁷ Aristotle remarks in his *History of Animals* that female cats are naturally lecherous: "The females are very lascivious, and invite the male [...]".¹⁸ Ironically, Mouse-Slayer appears before the court of justice because she is charged with having stubbornly refused to yield to the advances of the male cat called Catchrat. Rejecting him, she transgressed cat law based on nature and "naturall kindly actions".¹⁹ Another element that testifies to the ambiguous sexual potential of animals is the hare in *Democritus, his Dreame*, which alludes to the "sex-changing hare", "one yeer male and an other femal" in both Aristotle and Pliny's histories on animals.²⁰ But then, as in Chaucer or Shakespeare, "hare" is germane to "harlot" and signifies "whore".²¹

Nevertheless, Streamer sees a redeeming feature in Grimalkin, who unquestionably rules over the worldwide cat community, when he acknowledges in cats sharing their meat with other cats "a desire to save their kinde" on account of a feeling of "love and fellowship".²² In this particular respect, Baldwin's character's comment on cat behaviour is redolent of Topsell's later description of the "civil" elephant, considered generous as he will "not eat his meat alone".²³ He even compares them with "reasonable civil men" rather than to "unreasonable brute beasts".²⁴

Interestingly enough, *The Dreame*, that makes the anthropomorphic elephant talk about the ways and habits of his own species, doesn't commit the same blunder as Edward Topsell and his glaring mistake on elephants (or is the thing deliberate?) in his *Four-footed Beasts*. Topsell refers to "wilde elephants" said to eat meat: "but having found a prey, they go and invite the residue to their feasts and chear" [My emphasis].²⁵ Even though "meat" may simply mean food, sustenance, the narrower sense of flesh of animals killed for food is likely here, as it is attested from the early 14th century. The example of the chameleon as meat "devoured" by the elephant is an allusion to Aristotle and Pliny's handling of the life of the animal in *Natural History*.²⁶ Yet, in Pliny's history, eating the chameleon (or the "ground lion") is not intentional but accidental.²⁷ In *Democritus, his Dreame*, however, the elephant's staple food is grass: "I feed not (as the flea) on others blood, / But the greene grasse contents me for my food".²⁸

The study of the fictional animal in beast fables is inseparable from the study of the real one, as this raw material has long been ingested, digested, but can be modified to be transformed into a tale. Conversely, Thorsten Fogen emphasizes the importance of evidence from anecdotes from some of Pliny's work or Aelian's rather than Aristotle's, focused on individual specimen of the species under scrutiny. In this article, the critic points them out as "associative narratives".²⁹

Finally, Streamer's experimental search for knowledge is unlike the scientific endeavour of the earliest zoologists and biologists and yet, he gives the undisputed proof of his experience and his dedication to his *ars scientifica*, that may, of course, turn out to be complete illusion...

However, such investigations are hardly affordable for Streamer, whose poverty, he explains, hampered his work. Streamer is the self-proclaimed researcher with a practical turn of mind but a somewhat wandering one. So, Streamer seeks to find funds to continue with his intellectual pursuits, pioneering into the field of animal mind, laying the foundations of the principles of animal use of reason and speech... ! His request incongruously reminds one of the mendicant friars, who were bound by a vow of poverty and devoted to an ascetic way of life.

Having beasts talk – the shift from the assumption of man as rational story-telling animal to the playful animal display of rational thinking and linguistic skills.

Streamer's intimate experience of beasts' supposedly rational mind while others teach from textbooks, is fuelled by clinical observation and laboratory exploration. Experience and experimenting are the structural backbone of his narrative and serve an experimental kind of storytelling on man's vices and follies.

In an article on social and behavioral sciences, Claudia Mesaros boldly asserts that there is a concept of animal mind in Aristotle:

It can be described by three main features: a) one that is common to humans, that is, assuming sensible forms of observed objects b) practical reasoning or some form of deciding towards actions c) dispositions like simplicity, courage, temper and so on, pointed by analogy.³⁰

While observing and exhibiting an outstanding capacity for action all along, Mouse-slayer can take the external form and dissociate herself from the human object observed. Therefore, we can grant her a particularly high degree of intentionality. What's more, there is an analogy between Streamer's position as spy and Mouse-slayer's tight supervision of humans. For instance, the young gentleman's fond but too persistent chase, whose goal is an unwilling lady's surrender, can be paralleled with the sexual harassment of such an opinionated "lack-love" "kill-courtesy" cat as Catchrat.³¹

According to Mary Beagon's commentary on Pliny's *Natural History*, "man is indeed awarded a first place in the *NH*, both in order of appearance and in the amount of space devoted to him".³² In *Democritus his Dreame*, the kernel of the problem is indeed pride of place, as only the noblest beast deserves to win the contest, the flea and the elephant both reasoning and praising his or her own merits, insisting on the other's demerits. The elephant's life is spent in selfless devotion to man as "All beastes were made / To serue the vse of man".³³ On the contrary, with her tiny body, the flea's pretensions may

well seem laughable, and yet, the argument put forward by the flea that the arrogant bulky elephant is enslaved by man and that she did not surrender her freedom, is a sound argument. *The Dreame* gives priority to man's superior language and ways through the markedly cheerful vision of Democritus. Aristotle's idea that "no animal but man ever laughs" is formulated in *Animal Parts*.³⁴ Accordingly, Democritus wonders:

What dost not laugh?
Thou are no man at all.
Laughter to man is alway naturall,
And to man onely.³⁵

On the other hand, weeping Heraclitus sees man as "weeping born" and therefore "borne to weep".³⁶ Besides, he cannot but weep when he sees such bleak prospects for humanity since he only sees the beast in man, the "beastly man":

O when I hear that beasts use reason,
Then I weep to think beasts live in shape of men.³⁷

In *Beware the Cat*, Gregory Streamer demands that he should not be interrupted by his listeners, that his voice should be considered the authoritative voice on the subject of animal reason and speech. Nevertheless, he is not the authorial voice since G.B (Baldwin himself) is. A critic wrote that there was a more democratic spirit among beasts than among human beings in the story. Actually, we notice that Mouse-Slayer's speech told in the first person is interrupted, cut off once by Poilnoer (or Poil Noir), one of the three commissioners, but not to blame her since she's going to be exonerated from the charges against her, but to specify a point on kitlinghood in the on-going debate, in the interest of the whole cat community.³⁸

In *Old Mother Hubbard's Tale*, the rampant disease that lays waste to the country has deprived men of "their sense and ordinarie reason", so that it's an old unlettered woman with "a bad tongue" who can take over, "bluntly" telling a story about beasts endowed with the gift of reason and speech.³⁹ There are constant comments on the characters' behaviour, emotions, and inner thoughts, but most lines are dedicated to lively dialogue rather than to vivid description. The presence of the human storyteller, even at the heart of those long animal speeches, is still felt through the repeated use of introductory verbs between brackets, that leave their mark on the animal characters' direct speech: "Ah but (said th' Ape) the charge is wondrous great".⁴⁰ Later, the narrator's portrayal of courtly manners and of the ways of the world prevails. Speech, and *a fortiori* animal speech, has become scarce, unlike in the case of Baldwin's story.

Pliny has portrayed the human animal as a unique paradox. Not only is it awarded first place in the animal kingdom, but crucially, it is also set apart.⁴¹ In *Beware the Cat*, Streamer's Progress through his liminal position as unobtrusive human listener to animal speech in his initiatic journey toward 'cathood', leads him to self-effacement. In one of the hilarious episodes leading the storyteller on his way to an understanding of the animal world, a crowe is even calling him "knave", and doing so "in his language".⁴² The word "language" is applied to communication between animals on three different occasions in the story. The long and difficult constructed nature of human speech is relegated in the background in favour of an instantaneous and somehow miraculous understanding power of cat speech. Streamer's first and last authorial intrusion in Mouse-slayer's first-person narrative reflects the structural technique of embedded narratives, but also the uncanny quality of Streamer's sudden estrangement from his own kind. The cat's reported speech is embedded in the strikingly long sentence uttered by the human storyteller: "I will my Lord quoth Mous leyer, which is the Cat

which as I tolde you stood before the great Cat the night before, continually mewling”.⁴³ The initials G.S. at the end of the letter of the deceased suitor within Mouse-slayer’s story-within-the-story call to mind the cameo appearances of Alfred Hitchcock playing brief non-speaking roles in his own films. The anamorphic initials represent the return of the repressed human voice of the storyteller, that will endure, despite Mouse-slayer’s graphic account of her sharp vicissitudes of fortune among humans. On the other hand, the cats’ language is a universal language, one spoken across various countries, the vector of cat culture. The reader is caught unawares by this singular shift from human speech to cat speech, repeating and intensifying the already acute sense of strangeness felt in the first oration when all of a sudden, a cat is addressing a human being and understood by him instantly. This ocular and auditory proof of the existence of reason and speech among beasts and fowls is overwhelming.

A related point to consider is how the text proceeds to initiate the idea of communication. The first perception of a voice is preceded by a brutal pervasive cacophony of jarring notes. As he crosses the threshold of abnormality, Streamer is first incapable of coping with the ear-splitting noise, and wants to stop his ears when the bells start ringing into his ears. The horrified discovery of primordial sound corresponds to the Aristotelian rediscovery of the manner in which sounds travel in the air and strike it, like bodies striking each other and setting up motions in the air. The subject matter is then how matter is transformed into form, mere noise or sound into voice. The reader is first made to evolve, just like the orator, within a dual textual space representing both the human world in which a loud voice heard is but a mewling cat’s and the magic cat world: “No quoth I (for it called stil) hear you *no body*? Who is that called so lowd? We hear *nothing* but a cat (quod they) which mewes abooue in the Leads [my emphasis]”.⁴⁴

To make the quest for animal language successful, the researcher first has to sever ties with the human community and, so to say, transform himself into a cat. The parts of animals hunted and killed, or their excrement, are ingested and a remarkable link is born thanks to this unprecedented understanding of cat language. Yet Streamer is merely content with spying and evince any particular liking or admiration for them, except at one point in the story, when Mouse-slayer’s speech makes him laugh. Indeed, he is joining in whole-heartedly: “When all ye Cats and I to for company, had laughed at this apace”.⁴⁵ He can’t help laughing at the joke at the expense of his human fellow-beings, bullied and victimized by the she-cat. This is epitomised through the marginal gloss: “The author laughed in cats voices”.⁴⁶ Aristotle brings into relief the idea that laughing is proper to man but he also insists that it distorts man’s face into an ugly comic mask. Laughter, in other words, can turn a human into an animal.

In Spenser’s beast epic, communication is rendered possible through the metamorphosis of nonhuman characters into human ones, so that instances of formal address like “Sir Mule” or “Sir Ape” are hardly oxymorons.⁴⁷ As ‘cathood’ goes, cats like Mouse-slayer are most certainly often well-mannered creatures. For example, in this comedy of manners, a comical trait that pertains to the exceedingly sophisticated Mouse-slayer is that she can eat her food in her foot.⁴⁸ This makes her a subject of admiration among humans, who, because they are vain and conceited, give importance to such trifling matters. On the contrary, it appears that, resembling papists, the beastly hunters have brutal ways and do not hesitate to resort to violence, which is in contradistinction to Mouse-slayer’s courtesy when she starts her story. Yet, when, like the flea in *Democritus His Dream*, the she-cat takes offence, she can be resentful and

behave spitefully as she does not fail to take her revenge in the most dreadful manner. Indeed, she wishes to “*acquite* [my emphasis] my [her] dame for giving me [her] mustard”.⁴⁹ “*Acquite*” here is an obsolete word for ‘pay for’ but also means ‘be cleared of charge’, so that one meaning applies to her mistress and the other to herself. The thing gives some evidence of her more than working command of the language as animal storyteller...!

There are obviously similarities between Streamer’s narration and Mouse-slayer’s, which plainly highlights the dialogical, quasi-Bakhtinian character of Mouse-slayer’s tale, placing the reader at the heart of a veritable linguistic laboratory. For instance, the neologism “*concupiscientiall*” (the science of a paramour) used by Mouse-slayer when arguing that she never shunned the company of cats that wanted to make love to her, ironically reminds us of the “*prescientiall pills*” of the “*Extaticall author*”.⁵⁰ Yet the pills turn out to be but a loathsome cat turd. The word “*turd*” signifies ‘a piece of excrement’ and refers to ‘that which is separated from the body’ or ‘torn off’. The meaning ‘despicable, worthless, vile’ is attested from the 13th century. Long before Albert the Great or his followers, Pliny’s *Natural History* taught his readers how to use cat’s dung for remedies.⁵¹ But surely, this is also meant to be an ironic biblical reminder, a strong warning signal that man, created by God, was but formed of clay, and in Wycliffe’s Bible, all things, of dirt or of turds: “Nevertheless I guess all things to be impairment for the clear science of Jesus Christ my Lord. For whom I made all things impairment and I deem as dirt [and I deem as *turds*], that I win Christ”.⁵²

Likewise, The pun on “*fowlies*” and “*follies*” in *Mother Hubbard’s Tale* shows the prowling fox on the lookout for hens, but also embodies man’s avidity and greed.⁵³ In *Catharos*, the wordplay on “*foules*” and “*fool*” is very similar to that in Spenser’s beast poem.⁵⁴ Using equivocal language and quiddities enables the storyteller to bind together those two different degrees in the chain of being, beast and man, which are seen as interdependent. In the theatre play *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*, the roles are reversed and the anthropocentric point of view now consists in using animals’ names for the characters: Dame Chat, Doctor Rat, or Cock. The allegorical wordplay is based on animal species instead of human vices and virtues. The name of the servant, Cock, together with the stolen cock episode, create the same sort of linguistic confusion, since the names “*Gammer*” and “*Diccon*” ostentatiously evoke the words “*gammon*” and “*bacon*”, whereby the doublet ‘man and meat’ converges with and adds to the doublet ‘man and beast’: “[*Which bacon Diccon stole, as is declared before*]”.⁵⁵

Prowling, spying, prying, purging, and pounding are activities practised by Streamer during the experiment. The etymology of the word ‘pun’ is germane to ‘pound’, and ‘punning’ signifies pulverizing or beating words into place.⁵⁶ The many disconnected references to parts of bodies in Streamer’s recipe are eventually unified into a consistent whole. Similarly, the narrator’s words are ‘beaten’ and ‘pounded together’, that is to say penned, making up the substance of the newly acquired language (and its subject-matter), refined by the narrator’s brutal exposition to natural magic “to subtilitate his sensible powers”.⁵⁷

In *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*, the human characters whose desires and fears are voiced through babbling, chatting, or stammering: “*paltered of a cat*”.⁵⁸ They are labouring through the particularly restrictive use of similar words and sounds.

DICCON. One while his tongue it ran and paltered of a cat,
Another while he stammered still upon a rat;
Last of all, there was nothing but every word, Chat, Chat;

In *Beware the Cat*, the uncanny utterance of the cat is directly addressing a man who is so speechless with horror that he cannot answer. The cat entrusts the man with the mission of telling his own cat an apparently trivial message, though of paramount importance: “Commend mée vnto Titten Tatten and to Pus thy Catton”.⁵⁹ In a most interesting chapter dedicated to demonology in Baldwin’s story, Ladan Niayesh brings out the alliterative pattern, the internal rhymes, and the trochaic rhythm of the cat’s brief message.⁶⁰ The weird incantatory mixture of civility and childlike chatty chat is resonant with *Gammer Gurton’s* minimalist, odd language. The conspicuous reference to the cat’s turd plainly shows a regression to an infantile interest in fecal matters and anal fantasies competing with Mouse-slayer’s feminine life-giving narrative of conception and reproduction.

To sum up, rumour (hearsay), voice hearing (auditory hallucination), eavesdropping with a greedy ear (overhearing), and punning (double entendre) are borderline phenomena that transmute the talking cats’ unspoken continuous mewling into booming voices conjuring up the sonorous verb of Puss in Boots talk.

Translating beasts into men and cats into Catholics? – the experience of metamorphosis and transubstantiation

Finally, I’ll take a closer look at the experience of textual metamorphosis and transubstantiation, which serve the ironical misappropriation of Catholic rituals, and eventually assess the proximity or the distance between ‘cats’ and ‘Catholics’.

Several literary genres contribute to the underlying current found in those beast fables. But the Aesopic fable is omnipresent.⁶¹ They are now subordinate to a long-standing tradition of translating texts, of transforming them, and even adding from foreign texts. We can name a few. *Beware the Cat* no doubt includes allusions to *The Mice in Council*, as suggested by the phrase “belling of the cat”.⁶² Then, *Of an Old Harlot or Bawd* and *The Cat Maiden* serve as materials for the developments at the heart of Mouse-slayer’s speech.⁶³ *The Hare and his Ears* is the source of the passage in John Baxter’s tract in which the lion proclaims that all horned animals are banned from the kingdom.⁶⁴ *The Contention between the elephant and the flea* comprehends a fable entitled *The Bat, the Birds and the Beasts*.

Talking beasts speak between themselves (and, far more infrequently, with men) but texts also communicate between themselves. Interaction entails interdependence between characters and intertextuality interrelation between texts of usually a similar nature. The shaping of the meaning of a text by another text is not unlike the shaping of a human character’s behaviour and psychology through the creation of a nonhuman animal one, adding layers of depth to the text produced. Bruce Boehrer showed the affinity between the Reynard the Fox cycle and the theatre play, and underlines a “change of focus” and a “logic of substitution”.⁶⁵ What’s more, Spenser’s poem *Old Mother Hubberds Tale* and *The Toile of Two-legged Foxes* also call attention to the beast epic when referring to the Fox as Reynard.⁶⁶

Cross-dressing, cross-species, and cross-gender (with potential homoerotic connotations) are closely linked. Spenser’s episodic tale abounds in incidents and developments. Referring to Chaucer’s animal world, Rowland posits that “expressed in

its most extreme form, the premise was that the animal was a human being in disguise".⁶⁷ This is the portrayal of Diogenes, the cynic, in *Catharos*: "Diogene is a dog, the worst doubt not: his reprehensions dogged".⁶⁸ In Spenser's narrative poem, also note the alliteration that doubles the letter "d" in "disguised dog" and the letter "f" in "false fox" (or "foolish fox").⁶⁹ The gap between the first two episodes is bridged by the shift from the literal meaning of "shepherd" and his husbandry to the figurative religious one and eventually to the proper name and to Christ: "He is the *Shepherd*, and the Priest is hee; / We but his *shepherd* [My emphasis] swaines ordain'd to bee".⁷⁰ Moreover, transubstantiation is a common feature of *Beware the Cat* and *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. Admittedly, the cat's turd transformed either into bread or into a pill is an outrageous allusion to the Eucharist: "Gogs sydes fye it stinks; it is a cat's tourd, / It well done to make thee eate it by the masse".⁷¹

In beast fables that are political allegories, as is obviously the case for John Skelton's anti-Wolsey *Speke Parott* or Spenser's *Old Mother Hubberds Tale*, the transformation of characters into contemporary historical figures builds upon the figurative transformation of beasts into human characters. There were quite a few publications of John Skelton's works before that date, but a volume published in 1560 by John Day, which included *Ware the Hawke* and *Speke Parrot*, a satire on Cardinal Wolsey. The satiric poem *Speke Parrot* contains a line that may have been added to the poem in the late edition: "But Ware the Cat, parrot, ware the fals cat! [...] Thus dyvers of language, by lernyng I grow".⁷² Or did the poem more or less inspired Baldwin to write the story of Streamer's narrative? Is it simply because of the proverbial saying *Beware the cat*, that partakes of the shared ethic of Baldwin's time?

William Baldwin, alongside with Master Ferrers, is also the main editor of *The Mirror for Magistrates*, that retells the lives and tragic ends of prominent historical figures. Baldwin's narrative introduces real-life characters like Baldwin himself and the other editor of *The Mirror*, Ferrers, or M. Willot. By contrast, even though they are undoubtedly involved in the satire, the assembled cats remain fable animals and do not invite the reader to look for their human counterpart in the real world, although there are assuredly topical allusions that primarily concern religion.⁷³ In fact, though the talking cats retain permanent traits and not just individual accidental traits, in Baldwin's story, they nonetheless "resist allegorical classification".⁷⁴

An actor is but a shadow. *Democritus his Dreame* ends with the idea that the vision is but "a shadow of a shadow".⁷⁵ So, considering that an actor is but the substance of the shadowy character he interprets during the performance, G.B.'s disapproval of the staging of « *Esops Crowe* » but toleration of the rewriting of the fable into a text is interesting.⁷⁶ The crow's pronouncement plainly points out Streamer as a "knave", addressing him "in his language".⁷⁷ His reluctance to make "either speechlesse things to speak" and "brutish things to converse reasonably" confirms the choice of the novel for his story.⁷⁸ It is paradoxically in accordance with *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, a theatre play, yet one in which the non-speaking character Gib is not a talking cat.

'Cross-species' seems to be closely linked to 'cross-genre': "*Gammer Gurton's Needle* was the first to gather the threads of farce ... interlude, and ... school play into a well-sustained comedy of rustic life [with] the rollicking humour of the ... Bedlem; the pithy and saline interchange of feminine amenities; the ... Chaucerian laughter, —not sensual but *animal*; [...]" wrote C. Mills Gayley. [My emphasis]⁷⁹

John Baxter's religious tract is most certainly the text in which the relationship between man and beast is the least enriching and the most artificial, a world so much

estranged from the natural world in which beasts live that the apt word to describe it could be “ecophobia”.⁸⁰ And indeed, it is not meant to give any valuable information about beasts. Stories with a domestic rural background, closer to nature, in which common sense and proverbial sayings prevail over erudition and biblical references are, on the contrary, in harmony with nature. If ecophobia is all about fear of a loss of control, it means that the description of the beast in man may correspond to a form of ontological misanthropy because of the fear of otherness. As a matter of fact, for Aristotle, the misanthrope is an essentially solitary man and is no man at all. This conception found in Aristotle’s *Politics* is introduced in one of the marginal glosses of *Beware the Cat*: “A solitary man is a beast or a god”.⁸¹ Finding himself like all men, but at the same time set apart from his fellow beings on account of his recently acquired knowledge of ‘cathood’, Streamer vowed to rise above his own humanity and his own rationality, and so, his progress caused the pilgrim to become less than a man to understand the language of inferior animals on his journey toward a full recognition of animal rational mind and use of language.

Detachment and distance are vital ingredients to satire. *Wonderfull News of the death of Paule the III* is a ruthless religious tract, whose translator, W.B. Londoner, quite possibly William Baldwin, rejoices over the news of the death of Pope Paul III. This is a capital issue to broach the theme of transubstantiation since the appalling description of the cup containing the whore’s menstree instead of the wine and the feeding upon her flesh instead of the bread undoubtedly make it one of the most gruesome scenes subverting the Eucharist that has ever been written before.⁸²

All in all, translated in mathematical terms, the satiric relation between cats and Catholics would be an inequation, a statement that an inequality holds between two values, in addition to that that holds between speech and written text, between object and subject: “The Popes clergie are crueller than cat”.⁸³ Cats and Catholics undeniably have a lot in common, which explains why Mouse-slayer came to throw in her lot with Catholics, but being different too, why she had to ‘beg to differ’ and couldn’t quite ‘settle her difference’ with her mistress, the old bawd, or with the following one for all that. Her *difference* is threefold: as a sociable nonhuman animal, she pretends to ‘defer’ to those human rational animals, who however take her for granted, but the way she comments and passes value judgement on them marks her ‘difference’.⁸⁴ Therefore, the definition of the intrinsic nature of the relation between signified and signifier, between cat and human, or cat and Catholic, is everlastingly ‘deferred’, postponed, until there’s hardly a final meaning attached to it. Indeed, it remains undetermined, especially as the interrupted journey to Cathenes is now to be resumed, and as even Protestants may beware the cat and fear his disapproving report, thus even widening the gap between ‘cats’ and ‘Catholics’.

Conclusion

The highly codified but unpalatable cat-chasing story, though thoroughly enjoyable, resorts to a complex arsenal through which “papisty is attacked, but is also the site of textual pleasure”.⁸⁵ Baldwin is a myth-making storyteller whose vocation is to cast minds and lives in one and the same Protestant mould. As for other tales, he forged a chimera made of the body of an animal with its specific dispositions, but one endowed with a human mind, that observes, desires, judges, and decides. Thus, Streamer’s story-

telling cat may be likened to the “subtill craftiness” of the “subtile Fox” exposed in Spenser’s beast epic.⁸⁶ A parallel can also be drawn between the heterogeneous animal parts referred to and the load of cultural allusions that can hardly be said to form a consistent whole. On the other hand, those animal ‘minds’ may well be structured by a common language and common references, and yet, they can also be construed as the product of the imagination of a storyteller whose incongruous thoughts are possibly a mere illusion characterized by an odd medley of literary curiosities and a mixture of the religious, the marvellous, and the grotesque. This illusion is mostly meant to destroy and explode the myth of other illusions based on the Catholic creed. But the criticism is eventually levelled at Protestants owing to the wide range of competing perspectives and voices that pervade the text. Still, Streamer’s “sencible power” and the manner in which they have been “subtilitated” (p. 30) serving to substantiate the use of reason and language among cats, the storyteller may somehow seem suspicious to self-righteous Protestant readers. In the hymn, there is an air of finality about “Gegory no Pope”, engaged in a crusade in favour of animal social and linguistic recognition.⁸⁷ Streamer is ultimately associated with but remains clearly separate from his animal fellow creatures, despite his wonderful gift of a “wit” and a “kindely speech” when addressing animal species.⁸⁸

Penny McCarthy. *Cat with Kitten and Mouse*. On the occasion of a theatre performance of Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Stratford-upon-Avon. Saturday 6 July, 2019. <https://www.rsc.org.uk/beware-the-cat>

NOTES

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ABSTRACTS

In Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* Gregory Streamer, the storyteller, is instrumental in giving voice to Mouse-slayer's banter, as she exposes men's vices and follies, talking in a almost uninterrupted 'stream' of words. Élisabeth de Fontenay's distinction between objective genitive (talking about beasts) and subjective genitive (having beasts talk) will serve to analyse the dialectical relationship between human language domination and animals' traditionally muted linguistic subjection. The story relies on Puss in Boots talk, a first-person narrator's game of penning and punning. On the whole, how is the idea of the use of reason and language among animals substantiated in early modern writings? Are the cats and their Queen Grimalkin, the spearhead of the feline community, translated by Baldwin into Catholics, to the point of being equated with them? Whether they be beast epics, theatre plays or poems staging animals, or even religious tracts, such writings prove to be structured by a complex organisation, but also, especially in relation to popish impiety, to be fraught with verbal acrobatics meant to give the reader his biggest thrill...

Dans *Beware the Cat*, Gregory Streamer, qui raconte l'histoire, contribue à faire entendre la voix pleine de moquerie de la chatte Mouse-slayer, comme elle dénonce les vices et folies des hommes, s'exprimant en un flot de paroles ininterrompu. La distinction établie par Élisabeth de Fontenay entre génitif objectif (parler à propos des bêtes) et génitif subjectif (faire parler les bêtes) servira à analyser la relation dialectique entre la domination du langage humain et l'assujettissement linguistique de l'animal traditionnellement passé sous silence. L'histoire repose sur un parler de Chat Botté et les jeux de langage d'un narrateur à la première personne. Sur quoi l'idée de l'usage de la raison et du langage chez les animaux se fonde-t-elle dans les écrits de la première modernité ? Les chats et leur Reine Grimalkin, fer de lance de la communauté féline, sont-ils la transcription baldwinienne des cat/holiques, au point d'en être l'équivalent ? Qu'il s'agisse d'épopées animales, de pièces de théâtre ou de poèmes mettant en scène des animaux, ou même de sermons religieux, de tels écrits s'avèrent être structurés par une organisation complexe, mais aussi, tout spécialement en relation avec l'impiété papiste, truffés d'acrobaties verbales, pour la plus grande joie du lecteur...

INDEX

Mots-clés: différance, écophobie, expérimentation, histoire naturelle, métamorphose, parties des animaux, place d'honneur ou place de choix, récits imbriqués, transsubstantiation.

Keywords: différance, ecophobia, embedded narratives, experimentation, metamorphosis, natural history, parts of animals, pride of place, transubstantiation.

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