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**Humorous Spaces and Serious Magic in William Baldwin's
*Beware the Cat***

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“And I am sure you are not ignorant of the Hermit whom as S. Augustine writeth, a witch would in an Asses forme ride upon to market” – Maister Streamer, *Beware the Cat*

When spaces transform in William Baldwin's Beware the Cat, the transition is marked with humor, consistently signaling magic to follow. As an amalgamation of folklore, including magic that manifests around, for, and through cats, Baldwin's work offers adventure, laughter, and danger alike. Some cats are diabolical, worshipping or holding the soul of a witch; however, their wit constitutes a jocular contrast to that of our interior narrator, Maister Streamer, whose quotation above demonstrates a serious misunderstanding of St. Augustine's beliefs. Though Beware The Cat was published at the start of the early modern period, the folklore it contains speaks with medieval magic, and as such, characters debate and grapple with their conflicting and evolving views of the magical elements within their stories. Thus, Beware the Cat, though imbued with humor, is equally weaved with cultural meaning, and on a meta level, the text's multilayered framing welcomes the simultaneousness of this reading.

In William Baldwin's *Beware the Cat*, spaces transition within the momentum of socio-political humor as a prerequisite for magic. In this article, public, private, wild, urban, and bodily space are delineated according to their magical detail and humorous transition phase. A variety of magic flows throughout the stories, and according to medieval usage, include diabolical (witch transformation), common (philtre creation), and natural (astrology).¹ *Beware the Cat* is not a novel, poem, or a short story; its unique structure contains up to four simultaneous frame narratives and comprises three sections which progress the main plot. Each section's primary narrator is “Maister Streamer,”² who is telling three companions magical cat stories from their shared bedroom within the King's court. On each page of the text, our narrator, in the role of recording a story that is not his, leaves

1 Rider, *Magic and Religion*, 46-69; Davies, *Popular Magic*, 67-91; Bailey, “Diabolic Magic,” 361-92

2 Spelled both “Stremer” and “Streamer” in the text.

comments to readers in the margins which are often hilariously ironic or sarcastic. Throughout the discussion to follow, these comments will be marked with (MC) to signal “margin comment;” this paratext is included in our analysis because the content is vibrantly parallel to Streamer’s storyline, achieving a constant presence of external narration. While listening to Streamer’s narrative, and that of our scribe/exterior narrator, we get taken into additional interior narratives for the characters Streamer meets, and beyond that, into the lives of the cats who can talk and engage in a society of their own.

Baldwin as a Mid-Tudor Writer

Before we begin with the story, let us briefly get to know Baldwin and his context. The slice of Sixteenth century that pertains to William Baldwin’s work, between 1530 and 1580, has markedly been ignored in scholarship until the last decade.³ However, more scholars are now observing the dynamic social contexts of mid-Tudor literature and the complexity of its inscription. For instance, while writing *Beware the Cat*, Baldwin is “stuck in the middle of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, from medieval to renaissance, from catholic to protestant, from community to individualism....”⁴ As such, Baldwin’s work reflects tensions of between[ness] and becoming, not unlike the literature of modernism.

To start, how is Baldwin’s work identifiably mid-Tudor? *Beware the Cat*’s narrative structure reflects the time period’s transformation from a collaborative and oral literary tradition to the integration of mass-produced text copies available for the individual reader – hello printing press. The setting of a group of story-tellers at court, which frames this short prose piece, is not just an artistic choice but a direct reflection of what the typical reading experience was in early modern Europe.⁵ Since orality required extraordinary memory

3 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 511: Mid-Tudor literature is said to have been “neglected in large part because it seems to speak with such an impenetrable accent, seems incapable of understanding the grand historical shifts it sits inside, and seems (at best) like a momentary amusement that quickly grows tedious the longer one has to keep sorting out what it is saying.”

4 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 512.

5 Pincombe and Shrank, “Prologue,” 48.

and listening skills, the “oration” of Streamer in *Beware the Cat* consistently misinforming the audience, immediately signals the opportunity for risible group interaction. As this article’s title suggests, the story is also representative of “a characteristic trait of Tudor books: ambiguity that is often playful.”⁶ However, early modern “playfulness” may be cited in more ways than one, as is observed in later works known for sardonic jokes, gloomy or grisly irony, and acrid sarcasm, such as Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1589). Overall, then, “Mid Tudor culture is a bewildering fusion of the serious and risible, real and imagined, and every detail of *Beware the Cat* alerts us to the consequences of this fusion”⁷ – indeed there is a frustrated lightheartedness in comparing popes to witches.

This literary period is also known for the notion of *copia*, associated with the literary-sigh-of-relief which accompanied Elizabeth I. *Copia*, as a formal writing trait, is abundance in descriptive moments and the playing with the sound of words; often noted in lengthy lists.⁸ In Baldwin’s *Beware the Cat*, during the “third parte of Maister Streamers Oration,” Streamer begins with a continuous flow of incorrect observations about the moon as an object in Astronomy. This is flagged by a margin comment from our external narrator: “Astronomers are deceived;” here, Streamer describes a “waxing and waning,” “eb and flowe,” “neither to nepe and spring: but the neping and springing...,” “high or lowe,” and a moon that “ful by means of spring, had fully cast....” This continues in iterations for a full page - all for the conclusion that “it is not the Moon that/ causeth the Sea to eb and flowe....”⁹ Though jovial sections like this are of interest to this article, there is a breadth of tone in Baldwin’s work overall. For instance, in the poem that accompanies *Beware*

6 Pincombe and Shrank, “Prologue,” 50.

7 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 554: here Maslen’s article seems to posit examples of oppressive government in *Beware the Cat*. He sees them speaking to the threatening consequences of social deviation and simultaneously the dangers of unverified information.

8 Pincombe and Shrank, “Prologue,” 62-3.

9 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 48.

the Cat, in the 1963 edition, *The Funerals of King Edward the Sixth*, Baldwin somberly addresses his political concerns. This work “takes its point of origin in a historical event, but it does not allow that event -the King’s death- to limit its poetic horizons. The actual funeral of the young monarch is the absent centre of a poem whose real and urgent concern is with malaise at the level of the nation... .”¹⁰ Similarly, *Beware the Cat* is set at Christmas, inspired by a night Baldwin had at the King’s court, when Edward VI was still alive.¹¹ This observation, from the *Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature* (2009), helps to explain the high number of allegorical-readings for early modern texts. There is a noticeable fusion of serious social concern and entertainment, underscoring political meaning through its play, “which illustrates the exuberantly proliferating energies of mid-Tudor literature...; it is wildly eclectic, and it flaunts its book-learning.”¹² Baldwin’s employment of “book-learning” in *Beware the Cat*, as we will observe in more detail later, works as a double mechanism for creating laughter and engaging an informed audience.

On the topic of historical context, we may wonder why *Beware the Cat* was published posthumously, about sixteen years after it was finished; its print release was so far removed from Baldwin, and its time of creation, that readers in 1570 were convinced Baldwin was trying to posit Streamer as a real person.¹³ The social milieu of the Tudor period was rife with life threatening religious and political debate, so authors had to be careful when and how they expressed their thoughts, as is most famously connected to the struggle of protestant writers living in Queen Mary’s England.¹⁴ As such, Baldwin is thought to have had publishing aliases. During Baldwin’s life, “fiction

10 Pincombe and Shrank, “Prologue,” 45.

11 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 551.

12 Pincombe and Shrank, “Prologue,” 45.

13 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 540.

14 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 512: The imagination of authors was at issue because beliefs, or even just jokes taken to heart, could lead to execution based on the “consequences” of violent censorship.

is dangerous territory,”¹⁵ because even representationally, “truth emerges with difficulty in the mid-Tudor world”¹⁶ due to varying levels of censorship alongside tumultuous publishing practices. For instance, it is theorized that Baldwin was unable to publish *The Funerals* under Mary because it was too “unruly,”¹⁷ and likewise with *Beware the Cat* possibly due to its turbulent pope jokes. Even under Edward VI and Elizabeth I, though, authors and entertainers still had to be careful not to offend the respective monarchial regime.¹⁸

Reputation and Critique

Baldwin’s *Funerals of King Edward the Sixth* is one of his career’s seminal works. It is a poem about the sickness of the monarchy as a political body, portrayed via the vivid and detailed symptoms of Edward’s dying body.¹⁹ In another, more somber work, the poem “*Canticles* [1549]... Baldwin paraphrases in verse the Song of Solomon; the project is perfectly constant with one of the central tenets of the religious reformers; the translation of the bible would make it more available for people... *The Canticles or Ballads of Salomon* is thus in accord with the writing which others around Whitchurche [printing press where he lived and worked] were doing.”²⁰ Though Baldwin’s *Funerals* is one of his notable works, he is typically not trophied for his poetry, especially his shorter poems, nor did he seem to be in his time; however, his prose and a collection of clichés have drawn considerable attention. The latter is titled *A Treatise of Moral Philosophy* (1548) is comprised of quotations incorrectly assigned to classic philosophers, something Streamer would do, and was widely popular in his lifetime.²¹ I image *Treatise* to be like a coffee-table

15 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 553.

16 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 542.

17 Pincombe and Shrank, “Prologue,” 45 and Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 543.

18 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 544-5.

19 Pincombe and Shrank, “Prologue,” 43.

20 Holden’s Introduction: Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 8.

21 Holden’s Introduction: Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 7-8.

book in the twenty-first century, and perhaps proof of Baldwin's frequent interest in humor. However, scholars initially discovered Baldwin due to his editing of the *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559); in this way, he was connected to a prominent "circle of Protestant writers and reformers," and by 1560, "there was praise for Baldwin and a clear connection between him and the literary group of the Inns of Court."²² For example, Jasper Heywood writes "'of Baldwyns worthie name, Whose Myrroure dothe of Magistrartes, proclayme eternall fame' ... in the 'Preface' of his translation of Seneca's *Thyestes*."²³

Considerable scholarship on *Beware the Cat* locks onto the story's allegorical and satiric modes, which makes sense given the socio-political contexts outlined above. For instance, William P. Holden, in the editor's introduction to the 1963 addition, offers a comparison between *Beware the Cat* and the later novel *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift (1726) by reading the story as a text which seeks to critique society through a cat representation of the erroneous human world - to comment on the politics and religion of its time via an "outside" civilization as Swift does in his later novel. Though he also noted that *Beware the Cat* attempts to be reminiscent of *The Canterbury Tales* (1392) in structure and with its "easy informality of a group" setting and its inclusion of "a number of minor stories."²⁴ Similar to Holden's Swift reading, Christina Wald's article "Baldwin: Beware the Cat," (2015) focuses also on the cat society as a mimic, but with a heavier focus on religion than the flaws of monarchs.²⁵ However, as a pivot point for our discussion here, Holden read *Beware the Cat* also as an illustration of Baldwin's bias against medieval thought which aligns in some ways with an article by Robert Maslen, "William Baldwin and the Tudor Imagination," (2009) positing *Beware the Cat* as a warning against uncontrolled imagination as a pre-positivist threat. In this vein, Streamer is key for expressing this concern of unchecked fact.

22 Holden's Introduction: Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 7, 10.

23 Holden's Introduction: Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 10.

24 Holden's Introduction: Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 13.

25 Wald's article discusses representations of Catholicism within Streamer's cat world.

Though it is fair to suggest a Humanist lean for Baldwin, this article veers away from a static position for *Beware the Cat's* use of medieval folklore. I do not seek to underscore the stories in *Beware the Cat* as “old wives’ tales” nor do I draw the conclusion that Baldwin was concerned with “spreading irrational beliefs based on deceit,” “transmitted from generation to generation, in defiance of evidence and reason.”²⁶ This is because, as Maslen himself point out, Baldwin was writing in a time when literature was struggling to articulate its own representations²⁷ - as is easily observed today, social chaos can engender multiplicity in belief systems.

The Story: Ireland, St. Johns Wood, and the World of Cats

The first section of *Beware the Cat* contains mini stories that explain and contextualize Streamer’s interest in cat magic. The second section spans Streamer’s adventure while attaining a magic “philtre,” or potion, which allows him to understand cat language. The final section is dedicated to Streamer’s observations of a cat-court case, which is held below his window each night. This third section occurs after he consumes the language-enabling “philtre,” so it offers the most detail on quotidian cat society. This essay will focus on sections one and two because within their chaos spatial transformation is ubiquitous. In section one, Streamer shares a folk tale that he heard from a “Churle” (a name for “all farmers & husband men”), while visiting “Yreland,” about a “Kern” (foot soldier/peasant), who was living in a “Fassock” (prairie).²⁸ In this scene, Ireland, now Wexford, is a “wast wildernes.”²⁹ Note, in this period, wilderness equates to wildness, which is significant for understanding the kinds of magic portrayed in Ireland’s spaces. From the perspective of Ireland as a colony, Streamer enters a peripheral space conducive to supernatural danger. In contrast to twenty-first century modernity, proximity significantly

26 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 557-8.

27 Maslen, “William Baldwin,” 511: see footnote 1.

28 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 32.

29 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 32.

impacted views of otherness, since travel, communication, and intercultural contact was more difficult to attain. As explained in the text's introduction, "The locale is first Staffordshire [where Streamer goes to visit a friend and begins his cat magic inquiry, which was] isolated and strange to London of the mid-sixteenth century. There cats might well speak. From Staffordshire, the setting becomes Ireland, an area even wilder.... In Ireland, cats not only speak, but eat whole sheep and kill men."³⁰ From start to finish, the wilderness of the first section contrasts the London cat-courtroom in which Streamer is studying by section three; the latter is coded as sophisticated and positivist and the prior wild and diabolical. In London, Streamer uses natural and common magic; however, witch transformation, though talked about in England, stays in Ireland.

Rather than psychologize supernatural beliefs, our analysis here recognizes text-based evidence, which suggests how magic changes in its uses and form depending on space. *Beware the Cat* is estimated to have been written between 1552 and 1553, well before it was published between 1568 and 1570, and is known to reflect "what the age of Elizabeth liked to look back to..." - offering us a look at medieval folklore from an Early Modern perspective.³¹ People in the 1500's were experiencing a shifting causal ontology, but still, Baldwin was "no modern voice crying in the superstitious wilderness."³² At this time, people were neither "'conservatively superstitions' or 'enlightened'" but "for the most part border-line cases...He [Baldwin] attacks witches and witchcraft; but it is notable that his witches are Irish, of a nation notoriously [from the early modern English prospective] violent, strange, and untrustworthy...The *magic* and medicine of *England* were far better," for instance.³³ For these reasons, our interest here is on the humor surrounding spatial transformation, where the

30 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 15.

31 Holden's Introduction: Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 13.

32 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 17.

33 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 17. Italics added.

magic occurs, rather than looking for a mockery within the magic itself. Though it utilizes parody, *Beware the Cat* is not solely satiric

The story begins in a grave manner. The Kern is out at night to murder a family who are “his maisters enemy,” with his horse keeper as a travel partner. They ride “into his cuntrie, & in the night time entered into a town of two howses and brake in and slue the people...” (MC “this was an Irish town”). After killing the targeted family, they steal a cow and a sheep which causes the now past family’s dogs to start barking boisterously (MC “Irish Curs bark sore”).³⁴ They quickly hide in a nearby church. Through this event, a church, which is normally a public space, transforms into a private space; Baldwin addresses this with humor, and as he does this, their magical events begin:

...in to a church, thinking to lurk ther *til midnight* was past, for there he was suer that no man would respect or seek him, for the wild Irish men had Churches in such reverence, *til our men taught them the contrary*, that they neither would nor durst either rob ought thence, [MC ‘The wilde Irishe men were better then we in reverencing their Religion’]... while this Kern was in the Church: he thought it best to dine for he had eaten litle that day, [MC ‘The olde Irish diet was to dine at night’] wherefore he made his boy go gather sticks and strake fire with his feres, and *make a fire in the Churche and killed the Sheep*, and after Irish fashion layd it there upon and rosted it, but when it was ready and that he thought to eat it *there came in a cat* [MC ‘a malapert gest that cometh unbidden’] and set her by him, *and said in Irish, Shane foel, which is give mee some meat...*[MC ‘a cat did eat a sheep’].³⁵

The words “til midnight” probably signified for the period’s readers as a foreshadowing of magic to come because specified times of day, days of the year (as we will see in the “Philtre” creation), and amounts of time were detailed often in medieval spells.³⁶ It is also important to note that Streamer is thought to be a humorous character in general, insofar as his knowledge is reliably deficient. For instance, he performs the “Philtre” making process incorrectly, and

34 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 32.

35 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 32. Italics added.

36 Rider, *Magic and Religion*, 46-69.

mis-explains Albertus Magnus' astrology, as we will see in section two.³⁷ In this scene, the text displays Streamer's misnomer of the stereotype that the Irish were pagan when he says, "for the wild Irish men had Churches in such reverence, til our men taught them the contrary." Additionally, the external narrator's echo of that concept extends sarcasm to both Streamer and the Catholic Church. Further, the Kern starts a fire in this Church and slaughters a sheep and cow in it (categorically pagan), which is not what the English "we" did for "reverencing their Religion." Thus, the descriptions of the wild area's Irishness is the socio-political joke that Streamer misses.

As this humorous dialog is placed, the church transforms into a space for, in this instance, diabolical magic.³⁸ The cat that has arrived does not only speak a human language, but also asks for meat until she has eaten both the entire cow and sheep, which is far beyond the capability of her physical body. This power of disproportionate consumption is found throughout medieval folklore; thus, once the cat enters, the tone switches to a serious portrayal of magic – this initial transition is complete. After the cat eats the first large animal, the men start to become afraid and note that "like a cormorant not satisfied therewith [the cat] asked stil for more, wherefore they supposed it were *the Devil*, and therefore thinking it wisdom to please him killed the Cow which they had stolen."³⁹ This confirmation of the "diabolical" is taking place inside a Church, signaling that the space has been transformed in a powerful way

The second transition of this mini story opens with a new line of humor. The two men had been planning to cook the Cow's hide for themselves, eat some, and make shoes out of the rest, which readers are told would be cooked for tomorrow night's dinner. Certainly, there have been people in such hunger, but the

37 "Wel maister Streamer (quoth he) I knowe you are not so ignorant herein as you make your self: but this is your accustomed fashion alwise..." (35).

38 In this story, the cat is quickly identified as a demon, and it is not surprising that later we also find out it is a transformed witch. "Diabolic magic" is understood here as magic that relied on the power of demons. For more on diabolic magic, and its connection to witchcraft consider Michael Bailey's "Diabolic Magic."

39 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 32. Italics added.

circumstance of the cat eating all of their meat first was paralleled with the margin comment: “Kerns for lack of meat eat their shoos rosted,” as if this were a trait of “Kerns” that had nothing to do with a magic cat’s gluttony. In the moment following this humor:

The Cat had eaten three quarters and called for more, wherfor they gave her that which was a seething [the shoes], and douting lest when she had eaten that, she would eat them to because they had no more for her: they got them out of the Church and the Kern tooke his horse and a way he rode as fast as he could hie. When he was a mile or two from the Church: the moone began to shine, and his boy espied the cat upon his maisters horse behind him...⁴⁰

Once they are outside the church, back into a public sphere, the comedy ceases, and the moon has risen, signaling that the new space is a magical one. The mini story’s protagonist, “the Kern,” now begins a “life and death” battle with the cat, who we soon find out is a prominent witch named Grimmalkin. He stabs the cat and kills it, but while it is flung back through the air, “such a sight of Cats” appear and attack the boy riding behind him. Quickly, the boy is “killed and eaten up.”⁴¹ During this portion of the story, Baldwin’s margin comments are also somber: “Cats did kill and eat a man.”⁴²

After the narrative is concluded, Streamer and his companion who told him this story engage in a discussion about bodies as magical spaces. As the conversation progresses, we see a familiar comedic framework. They begin with a discourse on the cat’s hunger and the viability of it eating two large farm animals. Streamer’s unnamed fellow storyteller suggests that maybe the cat did not actually eat all of the meat, but “although she [Grimmalkin] asked all, but took her choice and left the rest by as wee see in the feeding of many things.”⁴³ With this neutral-toned logic, the storyteller is suggesting that the cat asked for it all, but possibly only for the purpose of making the best selection of meat, rather than eating it all. Then, for striking joke, he says, “Which Pope all things considered,

40 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 33.

41 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 33.

42 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 33.

43 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 34.

devoureth more at every mele then Grimmalkin did at her last supper,” (MC “The Pope a great waster”).⁴⁴ Feeling satisfied with that conclusion, their concern then turns to the cat’s connection with a witch’s soul, and specifically that “Witches may take on them the liknes of other things” and “that a Cat hath nine lives, that is to say, a witch may take on her a Cats body nine times.”⁴⁵

While Streamer becomes further intrigued by Grimmalkin, who we find out is also the leader of cats and a witch known everywhere, not just in Ireland, he shares his initial impression that “a woman being so large a bodie, should strain her into the body of a Cat or into that forme.”⁴⁶ The unnamed friend finds this hilarious and makes a joke about Streamer’s intelligence because the serious magic at hand is obvious to him. In this moment, he mocks Streamer’s attempt and says that “one would creep into his mothers belly again: that other would bring Christe out of Heaven to thrust him into a peece of bread.”⁴⁷ This humor is immediately followed by his instructional and serious explanation for witch to cat transformation: “For although witches may take upon them Cats bodies, or alter the shape of their or other bodies yet this is not doon by putting their owne bodies therinto but either by 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 seers.”⁴⁸ Here he makes clear to Streamer that the transformation is not a mundane body contortion, but a serious and powerful magical transformation. Accordingly, Baldwin’s margin comments for these portions of the dialog include “transsubstantioners destroy christes manhood” (next to Streamer’s and his companion’s comedic retort), followed by, “How Witches transforme their shape” (instructional tone to accompany the latter portion of the discourse).⁴⁹

44 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 34.

45 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 35.

46 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 35.

47 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 35.

48 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 35-6.

49 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 35.

There is a third and final scene to the kern's story, which we have not yet discussed because the post-kern-story dialog above will work to clarify it. While Streamer and the unnamed kern-story narrator are discussing witch transformation, it becomes clear that only some cats are diabolical because they are transformed witches, and further, that non-witch cats are naturally logical and have language:

why then sir (said I [Streamer]) doo you think that naturall cats have wit & that they understand one an other, what else maister Streamer (quod he) there is no kinde of sencible creatures but have reason and understanding whereby (in their kinde) eche understandeth other, & doo therin some points so excel...men soules went into beasts, & beasts souls into men, and every one according to his desert in his former body.⁵⁰

Thus, "naturall cats" having their own society, at least in this folklore collection, is just how things are and instead of being associated with magic have become a matter of natural science, but as we will see soon, being able to understand the language of cats, since they are another "kinde," is not only a magical experience, but also one that requires a great deal of magical preparation. This cultural complexity is essential for our interpretation of the humor in the scene that takes place after Grimmalkin's murder.

The "Kern" was able to narrowly escape and return safely to his home, even after the boy was killed. He lived in a different town, and thus, his travel to it signals a new space and new cycle of transformation. He enters his home and takes off his protective clothing, described in detail as armor, which initially seems like a neutrally toned and explanatory part of the story. He then sits down at his table and begins to tell his wife what had happened to him and the boy. At this moment, his wife's six-month old kitten overhears their conversation and interrupts them: "hast thou killed Grimmalkin?" & therewith she plunged in his face, and with her teeth took him by the throte, & ere that shee could be taken away: she had strangled him" (MC "A Kitling killeth the Kern that slew Grim.").⁵¹ This kitten is not described as demonic or a witch;

50 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 38.

51 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 33.

instead, she is portrayed as a normal house cat whose “labor to revenge her [Grimalkin’s] death” is the action (MC “Bees love and obey their governour”).⁵² The magic of her understanding the man’s language is announced through the humor of her attack. The size of an animal, when imbued with diabolical magic, did not have proportionate power limitations, but in this instance, the attacker is a house kitten. Thus, her attack on the full grown man, right after he takes off his armor, could have been seen as comical (MC “the kerns armour”). Additionally, the socio-political analogy of bees from the margin comment signals the presence of comedy within the action.

Once the humor ceases, the serious implications of the cat’s language ability is extended. It ends with one of Streamer’s company saying that he heard about Grimalkin’s death from a friend who also had a cat (MC “A very straunge coniecture”) who was spreading the news all the way to the cats in London (MC “Each realme knoweth what is doon in all other”).⁵³ As such, the focus is redirected back to testimonies of the cat society. Between the moment of comedy and the end of this section, we transition from rural Ireland back to urban London, and leave Streamer in his bedroom, as he tells us “this former talke so troubled me that I could think of nothing else” - seriously contemplating magic.⁵⁴

After hearing multiple cat stories, Streamer closely watches a group of cats who meet under a “dead mens quarters” and cry below his bedroom window. As he does this, he gets increasingly inspired to find a way to understand them and begins to guess at what they are discussing:⁵⁵ “for one Cat groning as a Beare dooth, when Doges be let slip to him, throwled out so lowe and loud a base, that in comparison of an other Cat which crying like a yung Childe sqelled

52 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 33.

53 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 33.

54 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 39.

55 It seems the Irish can understand their Irish cats without a “Philtre,” but as Streamer struggles to understand the cats of London, it becomes clear that he needs a lot of magic to do so. The text does not address this in any way.

out the shrieking treble... Wherefore to the intent I might perceive the better the cause of their assembly, and by their getsures, perceive parte of their meaning.”⁵⁶ These observations of cat persona and language use frame our next episode of humor. Streamer then decides that a cat is meowing (he cannot directly translate their language yet) “as it were laughing at somewhat which they heard the other Cat declare.”⁵⁷ The cat laughing, and us laughing at Streamer’s premature guess, announces the beginning of section two.

After section one’s storytelling action, Streamer cannot sleep and instead “lay devising” a plan to understand the world of cats. He then realizes that he “had read in Altus Magnus works, a way how to be able to understand birds voyces.”⁵⁸ Our external narrator, as expected, underscores Streamer’s research as humorous by repeating the subject “birds” in a margin comment “How to understand Birds.” This mocking margin reminds us that the goal is to understand cats, not birds. Regardless of the incongruity in his plan, Streamer still uses the bird guide from Magnus, who he does not understand in more ways than one.⁵⁹ As explained the editor’s introduction, “Streamer’s carrying out of the instructions of Albertus Magnus is studiously wrong...Albertus Magnus’ instructions require that the practitioner go hunting on ‘S’ Jusedas day’ and collect certain parts of animals. Streamer goes hunting on the wrong day; but then he does not hunt, he begs promiscuously for animals and parts of animals from hunters;”⁶⁰ these errors are quite amusing indeed and commence a tediously long and humorous transformation of his body, and other spaces along the way.

Streamer briefly, and poorly, summarizes the “Philtre” recipe he is endeavoring to create as follows: “take two in thy company, and upon

56 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 39.

57 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 40.

58 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 40.

59 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 40.

60 Holden’s Introduction: Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 16.

Simon and Judes day early in the morning, get thee with Hounds into a certain wood, and the first beast that thou meetest take and prepare with the hart of a Fox, and thou shalt have thy purpose, and who so ever thou kissest shal understand them as wel as thy self.”⁶¹

Streamer, apparently unafraid of “an experiment,” travels into a forest, a notoriously magical and dangerous space in both early modern and medieval European culture, to gather ingredients.⁶² The joke is again enhanced through the margin comment which also draws our attention to the fact that Streamer proceeds alone -without any hunting dogs or the two companions mentioned: MC “Men and dogs fraid out of their wits in prooving an experiment.”⁶³ While in the forest, he begins asking around for animals, which engenders a humorous encounter with a group of hunters. Naturally, the hunters he meets get nervous about his intentions,⁶⁴ but Streamer ensures his listeners that the hunters are the problem, rather than himself: “I would shew you my minde of these wicked superstitious observation of foolish hunters, *for they be like as seemeth me to the papists*, which for speaking of good and trewe words: punish good & honest men. Are not, Apes, Owles, Cuckowes, Beares and Urchins Gods good creatures? Why then is it not lawful to name them?”⁶⁵ When he says “good and honest” while evoking God, Streamer addresses the insinuation that he is engaging in diabolical magic. The differentiation is important. He clearly considers his magic natural or common, and thus, not needing to be subject to the judgement of the hunters. For this portion of the text, the editor for

61 Holden’s Footnote on this scene provides a viable source for reading a parody of “William Copland’s *The Boke of Secretes of Albartus Magnus*, and provides an enhancement of our discussion: “Associate with the two fellows.... & go into a certayne woode with dogges as too hunte...” Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 41.

62 Voltmer, “The Judge’s,” 160: However, this notion can be observed in an array of texts from articles on medieval culture to Shakespeare plays like *Titus Andronicus* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. For more on the earliest forest connotations consider Wilson and Southam’s text *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-modern Europe*, 2000.

63 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 41.

64 Baldwin, *Beware The Cat*, 41: “I asked them if they had seen any where any hedgehog that morning...”

65 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 41.

our edition includes a footnote explaining that “Urchins: hedgehogs or porcupines, [are] traditionally associated with magic,” so the superstitiousness of the hunters is a question of Streamer’s motives after all, creating dramatic irony in the fact that Streamer considers the hunters “wicked.” Also, Streamer’s comparison of the hunters to papists is echoed immediately by the margin comment “Superstitious hunters are kin to papists,”⁶⁶ doubling the comedic value of the scene.

Regardless of this awkward encounter, the hunters eventually decide to give Streamer a fox to hunt with, which helped him finally get a hedgehog. However, during the scene of the Hedgehog’s capture, the fox tries to take his belt of dead animals forcing him to kill it, which stops the humorous introduction to the forest space. Though the fox’s wit could be read as jocular, the death of these animals is addressed with a specific ritual, and the space is subsequently magical. Specifically, Streamer recites incantations for a serious purpose. For the fox he explains, “I killed him saying, Iavol sheleg hutotheca Iiscud and to make up the messe, brought him hom with the rest,” and for the hedgehog’s death he relates, “I killed straight with my knife, saying, Shavol swashmenth gorgona Iiscud & and with the other beasts hung him at my girdle.”⁶⁷ As we can now expect, the respective margin comment follows this tone, and explains, “Albertus saith if a man when he prepareth any Medicin tell allowed why he maketh it: it wil be of more force.”⁶⁸ This concludes the hunting scene, and the new space is Streamer’s home where he begins to lay out the animal bodies.

Streamer’s friend, Thomas, visits unexpectedly during the preparation of the potion ingredients, ironically, with a dead cat. The cat had been trapped and killed because it was “doing evill turnnes,” and Thomas brought it so they could eat it for dinner. However, Streamer also needed this cat for his magic recipe, and, likely feeling protective after his interaction with the hunters, he decides to lie about this. He

⁶⁶ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 41.

⁶⁷ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 42.

⁶⁸ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 42.

confesses to his audience that he “had taken some of the greace the inwards and the hed, to make (as I made him [Thomas] beeleve) a medicine for the gout” (MC “Cats greace is good for the gout”).⁶⁹ The humor here is intensified by Streamer’s claim to be honest at the start of the scene: “I will hide nothing from you, [to the people he is telling his story to], but declare from point to point how I behaved my self bothe in making & taking of my Philtre...”⁷⁰ Though funny, this claim is not entirely false because he is not, presumably, lying to us; instead, he lied to Thomas by saying that he only needs the cat fat for a gout cure. Though this level of audience involvement is a product of Baldwin’s social context, it adds richness to our analysis of intent. Streamer reports that “Thomas was departed with his Cat: I shut my Chamber doors to me, and flaid my Irchin, wishing oft for Doctor Nicholas or some other expert Phisition to mak the disseccion, for the better knowledge of the Anotomy” (MC “A solitary man is either a god or a beast”).⁷¹ In other words, it is laughable that Streamer is nervous about how to cut up the animals. However, this humor, on cue, transforms his house into the now private, and secret, “Philtre” making space of magic; he begins to make an application for his ears and a lozenge out of herbs and animals.

Before Streamer steps out to the street to test his creation’s ability to translate cats, we discover the lozenge contains cat feces because he “took the cat the foxes and the kites out of the wine [which was boiling to create a jelly], and put them in a Morter & *added to them of new cats dung* an ounce of musterd seed garlike and pepper... made losenges and trociskes” (MC “The wholsomest things are not always most toothsome”).⁷² While we laugh at the thought of “cats dung” being “toothsome,” Streamer signals that he is departing from his private space and into the public street: “...I took an ounce of Alkakengy in powder...and heating in a frying pan my pillows afresh & laid them to mine eares, and in a boxe, I went out among the servants...”⁷³ Now in the public space, Streamer aims to test

69 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 42.

70 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 41.

71 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 42.

72 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 44. Italics added.

73 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 45.

his hard work and hopes to hear a cat speak as translated by the ear “pillows,” which he is wearing. This sequence concludes a space transformation cycle, but instantly we enter a new one. While waiting in the street, Streamer gets annoyed by “a shrewd boy... that needs would knowe what was in my boxe, and I to sause him after his sawsines;” out of spite, Streamer convinces the insolent boy to eat one of his “pilles” (MC “The ungrations should be ungratiously served”).⁷⁴ He tells the boy that by eating it he will “understand wonders: but also prophecye after them” (MC *Straunge things are delectable*).⁷⁵ As the boy takes the lozenge, he “began to spittle and spit, saying by Gods bones it is a Cats toord. At this the company laughed apace, & so did I [Streamer]... verifying it to be as he said”⁷⁶ Directly after this laughter has concluded, Streamer takes his own lozenge to show the boy that “it was not evil,”⁷⁷ and the serious magic advances: “While this pastime endured [eating his lozenge in the street]: me thought I heard one [a cat] cry with a loud voice, what Isegrim, and therefore I asked whose name Isegrim, saying that one did call him, but they [the people around him] said that they knew none of that name, nor heard any that did cal. No quoth I (for it called stil) hear you no body?”⁷⁸ Streamer can now hear the cats, and has heard a cat specifically say a name which no bystander heard. He realizes the magical concoction has worked and goes back to his “chamber;” he says, “for it was past nine of the clock, and because the houre of Saturnus colde dominion approached: I put on my gown & got me privately to the place in the which I had vewed the Cats...”⁷⁹

For Streamer, the magic is that he can now understand their language, which leads him into section three of *Beware the Cat*, when he fully emerges into their world by spying on a cat-court case (MC “Many noises in the night which all men hear not”).⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 45.

⁷⁵ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 45. Italics added.

⁷⁶ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 45.

⁷⁷ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 45.

⁷⁸ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 45.

⁷⁹ Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 45.

⁸⁰ Baldwin, *Beware The Cat*, 46.

Thus, the scene concludes with a serious tone and a continuation of the magical plot. Section three opens with a full moon.

As we have seen, conceptions of magic are portrayed as spaces of social tension and serious intersections of early modern culture and medieval folklore. This serious magic is offered through the stories in *Beware the Cat* via comedic spatial transformations. Many scenes throughout the first two sections begin with a context of place and a foreshadowing of magic to come. This leads readers into Baldwin's witty surprises as spaces take their magical shape. After the comedy disappears, we are left with a profound sense of what early modern audiences might have discussed insofar as their history with medieval magic and their experience with folk tales. In future research, the cultural significance of this text may be expanded through the exploration of the relationships between women and cats and the final section's cat-court hearing as possibly significant to studies on gender representation in the early modern period. However, the question I want to leave you with now is this: How are magic spaces signaled in early modern folklore? "... there be many strange humours in many mens [people's] heads"⁸¹

***Beware the Cat* and Contemporary Literature: Lilliputians and Cats and Bears, Oh My!**

As mentioned in this article's context sections, William P. Holden's work compares Baldwin's *Beware the Cat* to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, based on his reading of a representational governance critique. As a contrasting supplement, I would like to briefly parallel *Beware the Cat* with a piece of short fiction from nineteenth-century American humorist Thomas Bangs Thorpe, "The Big Bear of Arkansas" (1843). Thorpe's short fiction takes place on a steamboat floating down the Mississippi River, a public space with limited access, much like Baldwin's room in the King's court. The external narrator, a city-slicker, intellectual type, is taking note of what becomes the internal story and talks to readers directly. The internal narrative frame is formed by a brutish and boisterous fellow

81 Baldwin, *Beware The Cat*, 43.

boat-passenger whose personality differs greatly from the outside observer - sound familiar? The internal story tells of a phenomenon with a particular bear, told with a mix of genre elements including romance and realism, which occurs in rural Arkansas. This man could certainly be our nineteenth-century Streamer and Arkansas his wild Ireland. This modern Streamer then delivers what sounds like pieced together mini stories based on animal magic as a cohesive personal narrative to a group of peers gathered around him. Finally, just as the external narrator of *Beware the Cat* applies authority to an obviously clownish character, the same occurs for “The Big Bear.”

Our voice in the margins of Baldwin’s text concludes, “I knew these things wil seem mervelous to many men, that cats should understand and speak, have a governour among them selues, and be obedient to their Lawes, and *were it not for the approved authoritie of the Extaticall Author of whom I heard it*: I should my self be as doutful as they”⁸² Similarly Thorpe’s external narrator observes, “when this story was ended, our hero sat some minutes with his auditors, in a grave silence; I saw there was a mystery to high connected with the bear. . . It was also evident that there was some superstitious awe connected with the affair. . . I was put ashore at my place of destination, and I can only follow with the reader, in imagination, our Arkansas friend. . .”⁸³ The intersections mentioned here could become a separate article; to summarize, Baldwin and Thorpe share a non-canonical presence in literary study plus their group story-telling mode, vacillating dialect, amusingly crude interior story narration,⁸⁴ and frame narrative structure, make them a captivating match. These aspects also demonstrate how *Beware the Cat*’s scope exceeds its allegorical framework.

82 Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, 62, Italics added.

83 Thorpe, “The Big Bear of Arkansas,” 141. Violence warning: Thorpe’s “The Big Bear of Arkansas” engages racist language and scenarios. Additionally, this story is insensitive to nonhuman subjects (it goes far beyond Streamer’s vulgar “Philtre” making). On the same token, this work may provide useful historical context for eco-criticism projects; Thorpe’s stories tend to focus on the gross and excessive taking of animal life which aligns with actual decreases in animal populations during the nineteenth century (the history of the black bear population in Arkansas, for example, speaks directly to the fiction; there are also stories about bees and alligators).

84 Thorpe, “The Big Bear of Arkansas,” 135: “I read in history that varmints have their fat season, and their lean season. This is not the case in Arkansaw, feeding as they do upon the spontanacious productions of the sile, they have one continued fat season the year round; though in winter things in this way is rather more greasy. . . .”

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