William Baldwin, *Beware the Cat* (London: Wylliam Gryffith, 1570; Edward Allde, 1584; STC 1244, 1245)

William Baldwin’s *Beware the Cat* occupies a special place in the development of English prose fiction. Most famously touted as ‘the first original piece of long prose fiction in English’, it is especially noted for its playful, satirical style, its kaleidoscope of voices, and its curious architecture of inter-nesting narratives.  

The story opens during Christmastime 1552, at the court of Edward VI, where Baldwin and a few others – Masters Ferrers, Willot, and Streamer – have been put in charge of producing interludes for the king. The four spend their evenings discussing and debating various ‘sundry things’ and one evening come to a disagreement over whether animals have reason and can speak. Baldwin is incredulous, but Master Streamer adamantly believes otherwise, and eventually persuades the rest of the group to listen to his conversion story.

Streamer’s narrative takes place in an inset frame. Situating his story in a readily identifiable place in London (at a well-known printing house near Aldersgate), Streamer recounts an evening where he was kept awake by the constant ‘wawling’ or ‘communication of cats’. His account provokes a discussion among the residents of the house, who begin to swap stories about their own experiences regarding reasoning and speaking cats. Streamer is dissatisfied with the group’s testimonies and so decides to concoct a formula that will enable him to hear cats speak. He is successful, and his eavesdropping enables access to the innermost narrative, which is told by the cats themselves. Mouse-slayer is the primary narrator in this inner frame, and through this one cat we learn of the inner dealings of both the household and church.

The text is peculiar for its architecture and its inclusions of medieval spell-book recipes and bestiary elements. Its anti-Catholic sentiment, which undoubtedly had an effect on its printing history, should also be noted. Robert Maslen’s chapter on *Beware the Cat* in *Elizabethan Fictions: Espionage, Counter-Espionage, and the Duplicity of Fiction in Early Elizabethan Prose Narratives* provides an interesting and insightful perspective on Baldwin’s treatment of the Catholics.

Regarding the dating of the work, *Beware the Cat*’s pleasant blend of the real and the fictional has encouraged critics to use internal evidence to date its composition. For instance, Baldwin himself was at the court of Edward VI at the end of 1552 and was commissioned to produce entertainments for the king. As such, it is generally agreed that the text was written in 1553, one year from ‘last Christmas’ (3), and withheld from publication until 1570, twelve years after Elizabeth’s succession in 1558.

To date, there are three extant versions. STC 1244, printed and published by Wylliam Gryffith in 1570, is a fragment of four leaves; of STC 1245, printed by Edward Allde in 1584, there are two near complete copies (both lacking title pages) and a single leaf of A4; finally there is a careful transcript from 1847 of a missing 1570 edition that was printed by John Allde for John Arnold. For a comprehensive account see Ringler and Flachmann’s textual note.

In addition to these, there are mentions of a 1561 edition which critics have more or less dismissed. Yet the evidence provided in the 1584 preface to *Beware the Cat*, the descriptive records in the catalogue of Joseph Ritson, and an entry under ‘Fragments of Books’ in the Stationers’ Register prompt reconsideration. The possibility of an earlier edition has significant ramifications for the sharp invective entitled *A short Answere to the boke called: Beware the Cat* (STC 664.5).

Discounting J.O. Halliwell’s 1864 publication of an incompetent transcript of the missing 1570 edition, there are only two modern editions. William P. Holden’s 1963 edition is a reprint from the Folger copy of the 1584 edition (STC 1245) and Ringler and Flachmann’s edition is a reprint from the 1847 transcript of the missing 1570 edition (British Library Add. MS 24,628).

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Concise Bibliography of Scholarly Work on *Beware the Cat*

Bonahue, Edward, “‘I Know the Place and the Persons’: The Play of Textual Frames in Baldwin’s *Beware the Cat*, Studies in Philology 91 (1994), 283–300

Gutierrez, Nancy, ‘*Beware the Cat*: mimesis in a skin of oratory’, *Style* 23:1 (1989), 49–69


——, ‘“The cat got your tongue”: pseudo-translation, conversion, and control in William Baldwin’s *Beware the Cat*, *Translation and Literature* 8:1 (1999), 3–27


**on William Baldwin**


