A short Answere to the boke called: Beware the Cat ([London, 1561/1570]; STC 664.5)

The Society of Antiquaries of London hold the original imprint of the broadside A short Answere to the boke called: Beware the Cat, and date it [ca. 1570]. However, as the square brackets denote, this date is conjectural, based on the subject of the broadside rather than on any external evidence.

Because the date of the broadside is based solely on the date of its ‘subject matter’ – that is, William Baldwin’s popular prose fiction Beware the Cat – any revision to the dating of Baldwin’s work effectively changes the date of the ‘Answere’. Based on 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, it is conceivable that the ‘Answere’ was actually produced at an earlier date – most likely in 1561.1

As an anonymous invective against Baldwin’s curious tale, the ‘Answere’ takes issue with Master Streamer’s purported authorship. Streamer is one of the characters in Beware the Cat, and it is through him that much of the tale is told. The author of the broadside vehemently seeks to exculpate Streamer of the book’s authorship – ‘The veri truith is so, that Stremer made not that, / Nor no suche false fabels: fell ever from his pen, / Nor from his hart or mouth’ – and instead discloses ‘One Wylliam Baldewine’ as the true author of the ‘boke (of ten leaves)’.

While the ‘pith’ of the broadside is ‘to deni utterli, that Stremer made that boke’, the answere also calls into question the level of sophistication of Baldwin’s popular readers. That the author of the broadside goes to such lengths to expose the account as fictional suggests that early modern readers may have been more credulous than often thought.

The ‘Answere’ is available on EEBO and is included in the first modern edition of Baldwin’s text, edited by William P. Holden in 1963.

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Bibliography

Holden, William P., Beware the Cat and The Funerals of King Edward The Sixth (Connecticut: Connecticut College, 1963)