



The Fable of Belling the Cat

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To mine, Charles Churchill's rage was downright rancour:
 He was a first-rate man-of-war to *me*,
 Thund'ring amidst a high tempestuous sea;
 I'm a small cockboat bobbing at an anchor;
 Playing with patereroes that *alarm*,
 Yet scorn to do a bit of harm.

My satire's blunt—his boasted a keen edge;
 A sugar-hammer mine—but his a blacksmith's sledge.

(*The Works of Peter Pindar, Esq.* In three volumes. London, 1794, vol. II, pp. 346-347).

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THE FABLE OF BELLING THE CAT

The B and C texts of *Piers Plowman* contain the well-known fable of belling the cat with an obvious application to the political situation in England at the close of Edward III.'s reign.¹ For the earlier history of this fable Professor Skeat's note is inadequate: he merely quotes from Wright's edition that it appeared in the French *Ysopet*. But the story is very much older than the *Ysopet* (which itself, moreover, can hardly be considered a "source" until it is established that the English poet could read French), and it may therefore be of value to have the scattered data brought together.

The earliest known version of the fable is found in the Old Syriac *Kalilah and Dimnah*, which is dated about the close of the sixth century; and runs as follows:

The king of the mice consults with his ministers as to the possibility of freeing themselves from the cats. He himself thinks there must be some means of doing so. Two of his ministers agree with him and are subservient to his wishes, but the third and wiser one gives it as his opinion that an evil of long standing cannot be so easily abolished, and that any attempt to cure it may easily cause a great calamity. This view he confirms by a story. But since the king adheres to his resolution, he yields, and his colleagues bring forward proposals. The proposal of the first one, to hang a bell on every cat as a danger signal, is pronounced by the second to be not feasible. The proposal of the second, to go into the wilderness for a year that people may do away with the cats thus rendered

¹ *Piers Plowman*, ed. W. W. Skeat, Oxford, 1886, B-text, Prol. 146 ff.; C-text, Pass. I, 165 ff.

superfluous, is declared by the third to involve great hardships and to be an uncertain method. The third minister then makes a proposal himself, which is to act in such a manner as to induce men to ascribe to the cats the harm done by the mice, and to exterminate them, not as being merely superfluous but as evil doers. This plan succeeds, the cats are exterminated, and men of a later generation relate extraordinary stories of the harmfulness of cats.²

That this story was not properly a part of the *Kalilah and Dimnah* may be assumed from its absence from Ibn al-Mukaffa's translation (750 A. D.) of the Pehlevi original. Moreover, it is in none of the later versions, from the tenth century onwards, except the Greek of Simeon son of Seth (ca. 1080), where it appears in fragmentary form, and whence it passed into the Italian translation of Simeon made in 1583. But it does occur, however, in several Arabic manuscripts, of the twelfth century or earlier, of Ibn al-Mukaffa's *Kalilah wa Dimnah*,³ though apparently as an addition.⁴ While in the Syriac and Arabic the fable is only a part of the much longer story, it appears by itself—as regularly in the western versions—in the collection of Arabic proverbs of Maïdâni.

Negotii bravior pars restat.—Fabulam proverbii hujus explicandi causa adtulerunt. Mures, quum e fele vehementer afflicti essent, ut tintinnabulum ad felis collum appenderent, consilium ceperunt. Quum autem unus quis nostrum id appendet interrogasset alter proverbii verbis respondit.⁵

The earliest appearance of this fable in the West seems to be in Odo of Cheriton's collection:—

² I. G. N. Keith-Falconer, *Kalilah and Dimnah or the Fables of Bidpai*, Cambridge, 1885, p. xxxv. A summary from the Arabic version was given by Silvestre de Sacy, *Cabila et Dimna ou Fables de Bilpai en Arabe*, Paris, 1816, pp. 61-3 of the *Mémoire historique*. The Arabic and Syriac texts were printed by Th. Nöldeke, *Die Erzählung vom Mäusekönig und seinen Ministern. Ein Abschnitt der Pehlevi-Bearbeitung des altindischen Fürstenspiegels* (in Ahd. d. K. Ges. d. Wissensch. zu Göttingen, xxv, 1879), with translations (Syriac, pp. 16, 18, 20 ff.; Arabic, pp. 17, 19, 21 ff.). Nöldeke believes the story is of Persian origin. A French translation is given by J. Derenbourg, *Johannis de Capua, Directorium Vitae Humanae*, Paris, 1889, App. III. On the various redactions of the *Kalilah and Dimnah* cf. Keith-Falconer's Introduction, and V. Chauvin, *Bibliographie des Ouvrages Arabes*, II, Liège, 1897.

³ De Sacy, *op. cit.*, *Mémoire historique*, pp. 33, 61.

⁴ It stands *last* in the old Syriac version.

⁵ G. W. Freytag, *Arabum Proverbia*, I, Bonn, 1838, p. 169, no. 63; cf. also vol. III, p. 548, no. 473. On Maïdâni see Chauvin, *Bibliographie*, I, Liège, 1892, pp. 12 ff.

Mures habuerunt semel consilium qualiter se a Cato possent premunire. Et ait quidam Mus sapiens: Ligetur campanella in collo Cati, et tunc poterimus ipsum quocumque perrex[er]it audire et insidias eius precauere. Placuit omnibus hoc consilium. Et ait Mus unus: Quis ligabit campanellum in collo Cati? Respondit alius: Nec ego pro toto mundo ei uellem tantum appropinquare.⁶

Odo's fables were written about 1220. That his work was very popular hardly needs to be said. There are still extant two thirteenth-century manuscripts which contain this particular fable, one of the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century, and three of the fourteenth century. An Old French translation is found in ms. Phillipps-Cheltenham 16230 of the end of the thirteenth century. The English Franciscan, Nicole Bozon, probably got his version of the fable from Odo.⁷ There was a Latin translation of Bozon, which is preserved in a manuscript of the end of the fourteenth century. Moreover, Odo's fables were translated into Spanish under the title of *El Libro de los Gatos*.⁸

Besides those of *Piers Plowman*, Bozon and the *Libro de los Gatos* there are at least six other fourteenth-century versions of this tale known: (1) that of Ps.-Gualterus Anglicus in Latin couplets;⁹ (2) a translation (ca. 1330-35) of this into Old French octosyllabics, known as *Ysopet I*;¹⁰ (3) that of Ulrich Boner, of

⁶ L. Hervieux, *Les Fabulistes Latins*, iv, Paris, 1896, p. 225 (Odonis de Ceritona Fabulæ, LV^a, "De Muribus et Catto et cetera"). Cf. Hervieux, II, Paris, 1884, p. 633, fab. LXXXII.

⁷ *Contes Moralises*, ed. L. T. Smith et Paul Meyer (Soc. des anc. textes fran.), Paris, 1889, p. 144; the note, p. 281, says: "La source directe, comme le prouve le nom de *Sire Badde* donné au chat, semble être une fable anglaise." Cf. Hervieux, iv, p. 98; and for Bozon's sources in general see P. Harry, *Comparative Study of the Æsopic Fable in Nicole Bozon in University Studies of the University of Cincinnati*, March-April, 1905.

⁸ Ed. G. T. Northup, in *Mod. Phil.*, v (1908), 477 ff. The fable of belling the cat is no. LVI, p. 522 [76].

⁹ Preserved in three manuscripts written apparently by the same scribe: Bibliothèque Nationale fr. 1594 (olim 7616), ms. XIII of the Grenville Library, and ms. 11193 of the Bibliothèque Royale of Brussels; cf. Hervieux, *Fabulistes Latins* I (1893), pp. 516, 571, 582, respectively. This fable was printed from B. N. fr. 1594 by C. M. Robert, *Fables Inédites des XIIIe, XIIIe et XIVe Siècles et Fables de La Fontaine*, Paris, 1825, I, 99-100; and by Hervieux, with partial collation of the three manuscripts, in *Fabulistes Latins* II (1894), pp. 368-9.

¹⁰ Printed by Robert, *l. c.*

the second quarter of the century;¹¹ (4) that of John Bromyard, about the middle of the century;¹² (5) that of Eustache Deschamps' ballade with the refrain "Qui pendra la sonnette au chat";¹³ and (6) that of the *Dialogus Creaturarum* LXXX.¹⁴ Since the first of these, at least, may have been known to the *Piers Plowman* poet, I transcribe it here (from Hervieux):

DE MURIBUS CONCILIUM CONTRA CATUM

Concilium fecere diu Mures animati;
 Peruenit rapido magna querela Cato.
 Murilegus nos sæpe legit comeditque legendo;
 Cum nostris natis sic sumus esca sibi.
 Omnes conveniunt detur campanula furi;
 Sic improuisus non erit interitus.
 Concio tota probat sanctum, laudabile dictum;
 Nil fit, et abscedit garrula tota cohors.
 Ecce uetusta, sagax, uenit obuia claudica consors,
 Que cito non potuit accelerare pedem.
 Dicite, felices, que sit concordia uestra?
 Inserit ex gestis omnia silus acus.
 Arguit hos ueterana loquax quis forte ligabit
 Sedulitate sua tympana dicta Cato.
 Querunt qua faciant concepta medullitus arte;
 Non est qui faciat premeditata sagax.
 Nil prodesset enim sensato condere iura,
 Constanti vultu ni tueretur ea.
 Parturiunt montes; nascetur ridiculus mus;
 Nil prodest abs re magna futura loqui.

¹¹ *Edelstein*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer, Leipzig, 1844, Fab. 70; also in J. J. Bodmer und J. J. Breitinger, *Fabeln aus den Zeiten der Minnesinger*, Zürich, 1757, LXX, p. 167-9.

¹² *Summa Prædicantium* O, 6, 71 (Ed. Nürnberg, 1518, fol. cclxii; ed. Venice, 1586, II, fol. 155).

¹³ *Oeuvres* (Soc. des anc. textes fr.), I, 151, Ballade 58. Deschamps refers to the same fable in another ballade, *Oeuvres* v, 389.

¹⁴ Ed. J. G. Th. Grässe, *Die beiden ältesten Lateinischen Fabelbücher des Mittelalters*, Tübingen, 1880, Dial. 80, pp. 225-6. This work, with which is usually associated the name of Nicolaus Pergamenus, is found in manuscripts of the fourteenth century; it was printed first in 1480, and frequently thereafter. On the early editions and translations cf. Chauvin I, nos. 69, 70; II, no. 133 A. H. Régnier, in his edition of *La Fontaine* refers to a "Manuscrit de Sainte-Geneviève" containing *Le Conseil tenu par les Rats* (printed in *Recueil de poésies chrétiennes et diverses*, III, 369).

The fable in the *Dialogus* is as follows:

Non credas omni verbo, sed in omni facto intuum est de possibilitate et de fine, prout in fabula quadam refertur, quod mures fecerunt consilium, ut facerent campanam et ponerent eam ad collum catti, ut quando iret cattus, audirent campanam mures et absconderent se. Affuit etiam inter eos aliis sapientior, qui dixit: esto, quod campana sit facta, quia vestrum ponet eam ad collum ejus? Et cum non inveniretur, quis vellet eam ponere ad collum catti, destiterunt ab inceptis.

It is of course futile to attempt to discover the immediate source used by the author of the B-text of *Piers Plowman*. There are, however, two obvious possibilities: either the fable was circulating orally and the poet learned it as he learned so much of the 'real life' of the Fair Field Full of Folk, from mingling with his fellowmen; or he found it in a manuscript of, say, Odo's *Fabulae*, or some other of the various collections which contained it. But there is no evidence on which to base even a good conjecture. If the poet had a literary source, the most likely one *a priori* is Odo of Cheriton; but that is as much as can be said.¹⁵ To the further question, how the Oriental fable got to England by 1220 there are likewise two answers: oral transmission and literary borrowing. Something may be said for each. The former is a Protean sort of evidence,—if it may be called evidence at all; but in view of the known intercourse between the Arabs and the people of western Europe, both through Italy and through Spain, and of the demonstrated rapidity with which tales travel by word of mouth, oral transmission is always to be reckoned a strong probability. It can never be proved, but it cannot on that account be disregarded. Literary borrowing is also, in this case, not susceptible of proof; but a certain plausibility may be suggested. In the twelfth century the fable was very popular in England. The works of Gualterus Anglicus, Alexander Neckam and Marie de France are alone sufficient testimony of this. Moreover, Odo of Cheriton is not the only writer some of whose fables reached England from the Orient. "Considering the evidence I have produced," says Joseph Jacobs "of a larger Arabic *Æsop* into which these stories could easily

¹⁵ The "mus sapiens" of Odo suggests the "mous þa moche good couthe," but the latter plays a different rôle. There is a close, but hardly significant, parallel between the statement of the mouse in Odo which would not even approach the cat "pro toto mundo" and the similar expression in *Piers Plowman* B, Prol. 177, 179; C, Pass. I, 192, 194.

creep in from Al Mokaffa's *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, we are justified in looking out for an Alfred who knew Arabic in searching for the original of Marie's Fables."¹⁶ This man Jacobs takes to be a certain *Alfred the Englishman* who flourished about 1170 or a little later. And it is by no means impossible that a manuscript of Ibn al-Mukaffa's *Kalilah wa Dimnah* which contained the tale of the belling of the cat found its way to England, and so this particular fable, translated perhaps by Alfred himself, got into circulation.¹⁷ I do not adduce this as an hypothesis; I suggest it merely as one of the many ways in which the Arabic table might have become known in England.

Since the fourteenth century this fable has had a long and varied career. I shall not attempt, however, to follow its history among the later fabulists; it will be enough here to add a list (incomplete, of course) of such versions as I have noted.¹⁸

ORIENTAL

1. Old Syriac *Kalilah and Dimnah* (ca. 570); see above.
2. Greek translation of *Kalilah and Dimnah* (ca. 1080), by Simeon son of Seth: *Σεφανίτης καὶ Ἰχνηλάτης*, ed. V. Puntoni, Firenze, 1889, p. 295; see above; cf. Chauvin II, pp. 21 ff.
3. Arab. mss. of Ibn al-Mukaffa's translation; see above; cf. Chauvin II, pp. 11 ff.
4. Proverbs of Maidāni; see above.
5. Attaï et Riabnin, *Kniga Kalilah i Dimnah*, p. 266 [Russian?] (R. Basset, *Recherches sur Si Djoha*, in Mouliéras, *Fourberies de Si Djoha*, Paris, 1892, p. 49, n. 1. Cf. also Chauvin II, p. 24.
6. Decourdemanche, *Sottisier de Nasreddin Hodja*, no. 148 (Basset).

¹⁶ *Fables of Æsop*, London, 1889, I, Introd., p. 167.

¹⁷ There is a striking resemblance (which is probably fortuitous) between the advice of the wise mouse who pointed out (B-text, Prol. 185 ff.) the uselessness of trying to circumvent the cat and the trouble likely to ensue if he were killed, and that of the wise counsellor who held that "an evil of long standing cannot be so easily abolished, and that any attempt to cure it may easily cause a great calamity."

¹⁸ This list is made up from various sources (*e. g.*, Chauvin, Wesselski, Oesterley, and Robert), and many of the books are, I regret to say, "non vidimus." Where I have not been able to verify the reference I have indicated its source. After nearly completing my collection I found that Wesselski, in his excellent edition and translation of Arlotto (Berlin, 1910), had already outlined the history of the fable, though very briefly. Grässe's reference (p. 305) to Straparola I, 3, appears to be an error.

7. Albert Wesselski, *Der Hodscha Nasreddin*, Weimar, 1911, I, 120, no. 213.
8. *Abuschalem und sein Hofphilosoph*, Leipzig, 1778, p. 167 (Leipzig, 1868, p. 107.—Basset). A translation of *Specimen sapientiae Indorum veterum, id est, liber ethico-politicus peruetustus, dictus arabice Kelilah va Dimnah, graece Στεφανιτης και Ιχνηλατης*; ed. S. B. Stark, Berlin, 1697. (9. Cf. *Inatula* 2, 111-160 (Chauvin II, p. 110). Cf. Benfey *Pantschatantra* I, p. 605.)

WESTERN

10. Odo of Cheriton, ca. 1220; see above; cf. Chauvin II, pp. 131 f.
11. Ps. Gualterus; see above. Some times called *Anonymus Neveleti*, *Appendix*.
12. *Ysopet I*; see above.
13. Bozon; see above; cf. Chauvin II, p. 132.
14. Boner; see above; cf. Chr. Waas, *Quellen der Beispiele Boners*, Giessen diss., Dortmund, 1897, pp. 19-21, 52.
15. Bromyard; see above.
16. Deschamps; see above.
17. *Libro de los Gatos*; see above.
18. *Dialogus Creaturarum*; see above.
19. *Piers Plowman*; see above.
20. Thomas Wright, *A Selection of Latin Stories* (Percy Soc.), London, 1842, no. XCII, p. 80.
21. Arlotto, *Facezie*, 1568, p. 106 (Robert); ed. Wesselski II, p. 64. On life and editions of Arlotto Mainardi (1396-1484) see Wesselski's *Einleitung*; on this fable cf. II, pp. 226 ff.
22. Pauli, *Schimpf und Ernst*, 1522, cap. 634; ed. Oesterley, Stuttgart, 1866.
23. Laur. Abstemius, *Hecatomythion Secundum*, in *Aesopi Phrygis Fabulae* etc., Venice 1519, Fab. xcv; ed. Venice 1539, Fab. xcvi.
24. Domenichi, *Facecies, et motz subtilz*, 1548, fol. D^a; 1562, p. 154; 1581, p. 191; etc. (Wesselski, Arlotto).
25. Kirchhof, *Wendunmuth*, 1563, VII, 105; ed. Oesterley, Tübingen, 1869, v, p. 170.
26. Gabriello Faerno, *Fabulae centum ex antiquis auctoribus delectae et carminibus explicatae*, 1564, p. 47.
27. Nath. Chrythraeus, *Hundert Fabeln Aesopi*, 1571, 72 (Oesterley, Kirchhof).
28. Ces. Pavesio, *Il Targa che contiene 150 favole*, Ven. 1576, Fab. (Robert, and others).
29. Verdizzotti, *Cento favole*, Ven. 1577, p. 33 (Robert).
30. *Facetie e motti dei secoli XV e XVI*, p. 123, no. 223 (Wesselski, Arlotto).
31. Italian translation of Simeon's Greek, 1583; see above.
32. Seb. Mey, *Fabulario*, Valencia, 1613, Fáb. 24; cf. Menéndez y Pelayo, *Origenes de la Novela*, II, Madrid, 1907, pp. xcix ff. (Wesselski, Arlotto).

33. Caspar Barthius, *Fabular. aesopicar. libri V*, Francof., 1623, 5, 19 (Oesterley, Kirchhof).
34. Daum, 238 (Oesterley, Kirchhof).
35. J. Regnier, *Apologi Phædri* etc., Dijon, 1643, Part. I, fab. 1.
36. La Fontaine, *Fables*, 1668, II, ii.
37. Is. Benserade, *Fables d'Esop en quatrains*, Paris, 1678, Fab. CIII.
38. Francis Barlow, *Æsop's Fables . . . in English, French and Latin*, London, 1687, Fable XXI, pp. 42, 43.
39. Sir Roger L'Estrange, *Fables, of Æsop and other Eminent Mythologists*, London, 1692, Fab. CCCXC, p. 364.
40. Balth. Schupp, *Schriften*, Frank. 1701, 1, 781 (Oesterley, Kirchhof).
41. F. J. Desbillons, *Fabulae Aesopicae*, Mannheim, 1768, I, p. 163, Lib. VI, Fab. VII. Basset refers to this and adds: "Cf. aussi Guillaume, *Recherches*, p. 13."
42. C. Simrock, *Deutsche Märchen*, Stuttgart, 1864, no. 69.
43. J. Jacobs, *The Fables of Aesop*, London, 1894, no. lxvii.
44. Luigi Grillo, fav. 45 (N. S. Guillon, *La Fontaine et tous les Fabulistes*, Paris, 1803, I, p. 80).
45. *Fables en chansons* L. I, fab. 19. (Guillon).
46. *Fables en action*, p. 24 (Guillon).
47. Guillaume le Noble, *Contes et Fables*, t. I, f. 23 (Basset in *Revue des Traditions Populaires* VIII (1893), 292-3).
48. *Mosen. Palaestr. orator*, p. 324 (Oesterley, Kirchhof).
49. *Convival. sermon*. I, 312 (Oesterley, Kirchhof).
50. *Revue des Traditions Populaires* IX (1894), 646, the following story taken down at Villefranche-de-Rouergue: Once the rats succeeded in making a cat swallow a bell concealed in a bit of food; and thereafter they were warned by the sound of the bell whenever the cat came near. The other cats, enraged at this, put their strangely belled companion to death, and ever since this the cats have shaken their food before eating it.
51. F. S. Krauss, *Sagen und Märchen der Südslaven*, Leipzig, 1883 I, 55, no. 19.

The fable early gave rise to the expression "to bell the cat," which became proverbial. I have noted the following examples:

1. Skelton, *Colin Clout*, vv. 162-5; ed. W. H. Williams, London, 1902, p. 106.
2. In 1482 Lord Gray told the fable to an assembly of the nobles of James III. of Scotland, and on this occasion Archibald Douglas, Earl of Angus, gained the name of Bell-the-Cat. Cf. Scott, *Tales of a Grandfather*, I, xxii; and Scott's notes to *Marmion*, Canto v, 14, with a long quotation from Lindesay of Pitscottie.
3. Seb. Brant, *Narrenschiff*, 1494; ed. Fr. Zarncke, Leipzig, 1854, Cap. 110, p. 108.
4. Seb. Franck, *Sprichwörter*, 1545, II, 123^a (Zarncke).
5. Rosenplüt in dem Klugen Narren (Zarncke).
6. Murner, *Schelmensunft*, ed. 1516, a⁷ (Zarncke).

7. Hans Sachs, ed. Göz, III, 22 (Zarncke); cf. ed. Goetze-Drescher, IV, 30 (Wesselski, Arlotto).

8. Geiler, *Narrenschiff*, Strassburg, 1520, 88 Schar, 7 Schel, sign fijj^b (Oesterley, Pauli).

9. Egenolf, *Sprichwörter*, Franckf. 1555, 340 (Oesterley, Kirchhof).

10. Euch. Eyring, *Proverbiorum Copia*, Eisleb, 1604, 3,546 (Oesterley, Kirchhof).

11. Basile, *Pentamerone* (trans. Liebrecht, 2, 111); cf. Ebert's *Jahrbuch* III (1861), 161-2.

12. Ign. Guidi, *Nuovi proverbi, strofe e raconti Abissini*, Rome, 1892, I (Basset, *Revue des Traditions Populaires*, VIII (1893), 292).

13. G. Pitrè, *Proverbi siciliani*, Palermo, 1880, vol. III, p. 326 (*Zs. f. rom. Ph.*, v (1881), 407-8).

14. *Zimmersche Chronik*, ed. K. A. Barnack², IV, p. 46, Freiburg I/B. und Tübingen, 1882.

15. Johannes Mathesius, *Die siebende predig*, 1563, in *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. G. Loesche, III, 144, Prag, 1906.

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THE TWO FALSTAFFS

Most critics have maintained that the Falstaff of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* is inconsistent with the Falstaff of *Henry IV*; that the latter is at all times master of the situation, the former a mere butt of practical jokes. Sidney Lee, for example, says: "Although Falstaff is the central figure, he is a mere caricature of his former self. His power of retort has decayed, and the laugh invariably turns against him. In name only is he identical with the potent humorist of *Henry IV*." And it has commonly been assumed that this is the result of Shakespeare's writing the *Merry Wives* hastily, at the command of Queen Elizabeth, who desired to see the fat knight in love.

Shakespeare, however, was at this time (1599) at the height of his comic powers. On a *a priori* evidence it is unlikely that he would have written a poor play around his greatest comic character. And there is much more specific evidence that he has not done so. Hazlitt, as frequently, has an illuminating suggestion—although he is disappointed in the Falstaff of the *Merry Wives*. He says: "We could have been contented if Shakespeare had not been 'commanded to show the knight in love.' Wits and philosophers, for the most part, do not shine in that character." There is