



MASTER CAT,¹ OR PUSS IN BOOTS

Charles Perrault

1. Master Cat. While most western European versions of the tale feature a cat, eastern European variants favor foxes. In India the title hero is a jackal; in the Philippine Islands he is a monkey. Perrault's cat is a male, but in many European analogues the obliging cat is female and sometimes marries the miller's son after she has been disenchanted.

When George Cruikshank, the renowned illustrator of Dickens's novels, took a look at "Puss in Boots," he was appalled at the idea that parents would read the story to their children: "As it stood, the tale was a succession of successful falsehoods—a clever lesson in lying!—a system of imposture rewarded by the greatest worldly advantage!" And indeed, there is little to admire about this cat who threatens, flatters, deceives, and steals in order to install his master as lord of the realm. Puss has been seen as a linguistic virtuoso, a cat who has mastered the fine art of persuasion and rhetoric to acquire power and wealth. A trickster who understands what it takes to succeed, he moves his master from a condition of abject indigence to one of regal splendor, fulfilling his desires even before they are uttered. This Puss does wear the boots, and he stands as the agent elevating the third son to a royal rank.

Although both Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile published versions of "Puss in Boots," neither of

From Charles Perrault, "Le Maître Chat ou le Chat botté," in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* (Paris: Barbin, 1697).

their two Italian tales was able to compete successfully with the variant form that appeared in Charles Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose* (1697). Perrault's version attained such prominence that, where it has penetrated, it has altered the shape of older oral versions. Yet for all his near-universal appeal, Perrault's *Puss in Boots* has been seen as a creature of his time, a cat who models the kind of behavior required to succeed in grand society under Louis XIV in seventeenth-century France. The morals Perrault himself attached to the story either move against the grain of the narrative or are beside the point. The first, declaring that hard work and ingenuity are preferable to inherited wealth, is belied by the fate of the third son, who neither works hard nor deploys his wits to receive a kingdom. The second moral underscores women's vulnerability to external appearances: fine clothing and youthful good looks suffice to win their hearts. What really matters in this story is the use of deception and ingenuity to gain the trappings of a happily-ever-after ending.

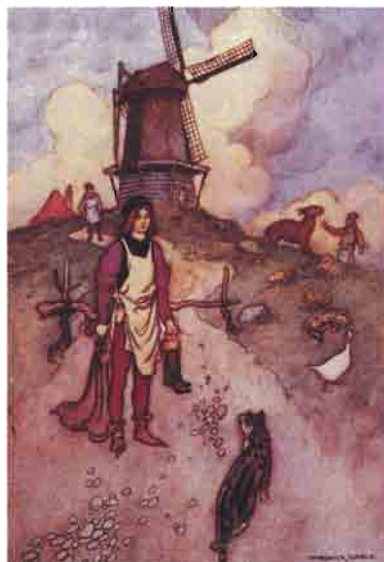
Puss, ever cheery and well-intentioned, seems to transcend his trickery in the end when he installs his master as lord of the realm. If the tale has any real lesson, it has something to do with inspiring respect for those domestic creatures that hunt mice and look out for their masters.



MILLER LEFT TO his three sons² all his worldly possessions: a mill, a donkey, and a cat. The estate was divided up quickly. No one called in a notary or an attorney, for they would have quickly consumed the paltry inheritance. The oldest son got the mill; the second son received the donkey; and the youngest got nothing but the cat.

The youngest son was heartbroken when he saw how little he had inherited. "My brothers can earn an honest living if they decide to join forces," he said. "But as for me,

2. three sons. In tales of three sons, the youngest, and often the stupidest, of the three is the one singled out for good fortune. It is the modest, the humble, and often the dispossessed who are elevated to a noble rank.



WARWICK GOBLE,
 "Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1923

"The oldest son got the mill; the second son received the donkey; and the youngest got nothing but the cat." The youngest son, trying to conceal his disappointment, brings Puss his boots.

3. pair of boots. In Perrault's day a fine pair of boots was a sign of distinction, and this male feline creature takes pride in his footwear. Although these are not seven-league boots, they seem to endow their owner with wits and an enterprising spirit. Note that footwear figures importantly in the folklore of many countries. Think of Andersen's red shoes, Cinderella's slipper, or the red-hot iron shoes worn by Snow White's stepmother.

4. able to catch rats and mice. The cat's acrobatic skill in catching vermin, the scourge of European cities in earlier times, hints at his resourcefulness and promise.

once I've eaten the cat and made a muff from its skin, I will surely starve to death."

The cat listened to this speech but pretended not to hear it and said in a solemn and earnest manner: "Don't be upset, master. Just get me a pouch and have a pair of boots³ made up so that I can get through the underbrush easily, and you'll see that you really don't have that bad a deal."

Although the cat's master was not encouraged by this declaration, he had noticed that this cat was able to catch rats and mice⁴ by playing clever tricks (hanging upside down by his paws or lying down in flour and playing dead), and so he saw a ray of hope in his miserable situation.

As soon as the cat was given what he had asked for, he brashly pulled on his boots, hung the pouch around his neck, held the strings with his forepaws, and raced over to a warren that housed a large number of rabbits. He put a little clover and lettuce into the pouch, lay down next to



ANONYMOUS,
“Master Cat, or Puss in Boots”

An elegantly shod Puss, complete with collar and bow, makes his way out into the country.



ANONYMOUS,
“Master Cat, or Puss in Boots”

“Don’t be upset, master. Just get me a pouch and have a pair of boots made up so that I can get through the underbrush easily, and you’ll see that you really don’t have that bad a deal.” The youngest of three sons, with unmatched shoes and stockings, tries to hide his disappointment that he has inherited nothing but a cat.



ANONYMOUS,
“Master Cat, or Puss in Boots”

“Then he waited for one of the little rabbits, one inexperienced in the ways of the world, to crawl into the sack and try to eat what was in it.” The cat, proudly wearing his new boots, lures rabbits into his sack.

it, and played dead. Then he waited for one of the little rabbits, one inexperienced in the ways of the world, to crawl into the sack and try to eat what was in it.

Just as he was stretching out, he scented success: a young rabbit, still wet behind the ears, hopped into the sack. Master Cat pulled the strings in a flash, grabbed the bag, and, without feeling the least pity for his prey,⁵ killed it.

Proud of his prize, he raced straight to the king’s palace and demanded an audience with him. He was ushered into the chambers of His Majesty, and, upon entering, bowed deeply to the king and said: “I am presenting you with a rabbit from my lord, the Marquis de Carabas (that was the name he had bestowed on his master). He has instructed me to present it to you on his behalf.”

“Tell your master that I am grateful to him and that he has given me great pleasure.”

5. *without feeling the least pity for his prey.* The cat’s mercilessness stands in sharp contrast with the compassion shown by heroes and heroines of fairy tales. Many fairy tales begin with a test of character, requiring the protagonist to share a crust of bread, rescue ants, or help an old woman. Puss in Boots, by contrast, is something of a rogue, who demonstrates his capacity for calculation and cunning by trapping animals.



ANONYMOUS,
"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots"

"While he was in the water, the king drove by, and the cat began to yowl at the top of his lungs: 'Help! Help! My lord, the Marquis de Carabas, is drowning!'" The cat creates an uproar in order to get the attention of the king and his daughter. The compositional similarity to Gustave Doré's rendering of the same scene is remarkable.



ANONYMOUS,
"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots"

"The ogre received him as politely as an ogre can and asked him to sit down." The contrast in size of the two adversaries is especially striking. The ogre is represented as a kind of Goliath, who will be outwitted by Puss.



MAXFIELD PARRISH,
"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1914

"He was ushered into the chambers of His Majesty, and, upon entering, bowed deeply to the king and said: 'I am presenting you with a rabbit from my lord, the Marquis de Carabas.'" Pouch slung over his shoulder, Puss is given an audience with a king who rules over a kingdom of unusually rugged terrain.

Some time later, the cat hid in a field of wheat, keeping his pouch open. When two partridges entered it, he pulled the strings and caught both of them. Then he presented them to the king, just as he had done with the rabbits. The king accepted the two partridges gratefully and gave the cat a small token of his appreciation.

For two to three months, the cat continued presenting the king with game of one kind or another, always "shot by his master." One day, he learned that the king was planning to go on an excursion along the riverbank with his daughter, the most beautiful princess in the world. He said to his master: "If you want to make your fortune, then take my advice. Just go over to the river and take a swim at the spot I will show you. Leave the rest to me."



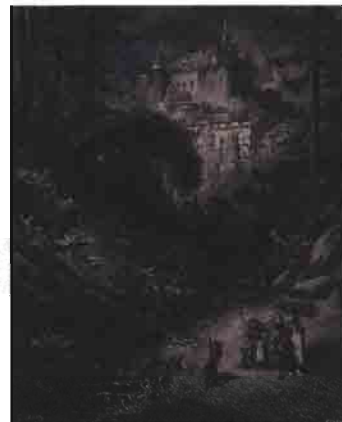
GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1861

Puss summons help for the Marquis de Carabas, who can be seen bathing in the shadows of the trees. Puss sports not only boots, but also a cap with feathers, a belt from which his prey dangles, and a cape decorated with the heads of his victims.



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1861

Peasants follow the orders of Puss in Boots, who threatens them with their lives unless they lie about their master. In the foreground, several peasants offer the viewer a direct view of their backsides.



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1861

Peasants point the way to the palace of the ogre. Puss, lost in the woods and seeking directions, resembles the prince in the story of Sleeping Beauty.

The Marquis de Carabas did as the cat told him, without knowing exactly what good would come of it. While he was in the water, the king drove by, and the cat began to yowl at the top of his lungs: "Help! Help! My lord, the Marquis de Carabas, is drowning!"

At the sound of the yowling, the king stuck his head out the coach window, and when he recognized the cat that had brought him game so many times, he ordered his guards to hurry to the aid of the Marquis de Carabas.

While the guards were rescuing the poor Marquis de Carabas, the cat went up to the royal coach and told the king that thieves had stolen his master's clothing while he was swimming. He had done everything he could by shouting, "Stop the thieves!" but it was no use. In reality, the scoundrel had hidden the clothes under a rock.

The king ordered the officers of the royal wardrobe to fetch one of his finest suits for the Marquis de Carabas. The king paid him a thousand compliments. Since the



GUSTAVE DORÉ,

"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1861

The ogre, whose appetite is voracious and who does not seem to appreciate any diversion from dinner, receives Puss in Boots. On the table can be seen hors d'oeuvres and the main course: a delicate dish of infants along with a dismembered cow.



ANONYMOUS,

"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1865

Wearing an impressive pair of boots, this gigantic cat arches his back and yowls for help with all his might. The evident lack of danger for his master is not obvious to those in the coach. This design seems to reprise Doré's engraving of the same scene.

fine clothes that the marquis was wearing flattered him (he was both handsome and statuesque), the king's daughter found him much to her liking. All the Marquis de Carabas had to do was to cast two or three respectful and somewhat tender glances in her direction to make her fall head over heels in love with him.

The king insisted that the marquis ride in his carriage and accompany them on their excursion. The cat, delighted to see that his plan was succeeding, ran on ahead. When he came across some peasants who were mowing a field, he said: "Listen to me, my good people. If you do not say that the fields you are mowing belong to the Marquis de Carabas, each and everyone of you will be cut into little pieces until you look like chopped meat!"

The king did not fail to ask the mowers whose field they were mowing: "It belongs to our lord, the Marquis de Carabas," they all said in unison, for the cat had frightened them with his threats.

"You have a very substantial inheritance there," the king said to the Marquis de Carabas.

"You can see, Sire, that this field offers an abundant yield every year," the marquis replied.

Master Cat made a point of staying ahead of the coach. When he met some reapers, he said: "Listen to me, my good people. If you do not say that all of this wheat you are reaping belongs to the Marquis de Carabas, you will be cut into little pieces until you look like chopped meat."

The king drove by a moment later and wanted to know who owned the wheat fields in the vicinity. "They belong to the Marquis de Carabas," the mowers all replied, and the king once more expressed his pleasure to the marquis.

Master Cat made a point of staying in front of the coach, and he said the same thing to everyone he met. The king was astonished at the vast amount of property owned by the Marquis de Carabas.

At last Master Cat arrived at a beautiful castle owned by an ogre⁶ who was renowned for his wealth. All the

6. *a beautiful castle owned by an ogre.* The castle is sometimes owned by a king, who has the misfortune to be absent at the time of Puss's visit, and who loses his real estate. The ogre is, in this case, the symbolic equivalent of a feudal lord.



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1913

A dapper Puss pulls the bell at the castle door, summoning the ogre to greet his guest.

7. *you have the ability to transform yourself into any animal at all.* Tricking the ogre into using his shape-shifting powers to turn into a creature that can be caught is a motif that appears in many folktales.

lands through which the king had been traveling were in his domain. The cat, who had made a point of finding out who this ogre was and learning the extent of his powers, asked for an audience. He claimed that he could not possibly be so close to his castle without paying his respects.

The ogre received him as politely as an ogre can and asked him to sit down.

"It has been said," the cat stated, "that you have the ability to transform yourself into any animal at all.⁷ I'm told that you can, for example, turn yourself into a lion or an elephant."

"It's true," replied the ogre brusquely, "and just to prove it, I will turn into a lion."

The cat was so terrified at seeing a lion before him that he instantly scurried up to the gutters on the roof, not without some pain and peril, for his boots were not made for walking on tiles.

A little later, when the cat saw that the ogre had turned back to his former state, he scampered back down and admitted that he had been terrified.

"It has also been said," the cat declared, "but I can hardly believe it, that you have the power to take the shape of small animals. I've heard, for example, that you can change into a rat or a mouse. I confess that it seems utterly impossible to me."

"Impossible?" the ogre replied. "Take a look."

At that moment, he transformed himself into a mouse, which ran across the floor. As soon as the cat saw it, he pounced on it and ate it up.

Meanwhile, the king, who could see the beautiful castle of the ogre from his coach, was hoping to enter it. The cat heard the sound of the coach rolling over the drawbridge, ran to meet it, and said to the king: "Your Majesty, welcome to the castle of the Marquis de Carabas!"

"What?" the king shouted. "Does this castle also belong to you, Monsieur Marquis? I have never seen anything as beautiful as this courtyard and the buildings surrounding it. Let's go inside, if you please."

The marquis took the hand of the young princess, and



HARRY CLARKE,
"Master Cat, or Puss in Boots," 1922

"The marquis took the hand of the young princess, and they followed the king, who went up the stairs." A proud Puss surveys the success of his project.

they followed the king, who went up the stairs. When they entered the grand hall, they discovered a magnificent repast prepared by the ogre for his friends, who were supposed to see him that very day, but who did not dare enter, knowing that the king was there.

The king was as charmed by the many qualities of the Marquis de Carabas, as was his daughter, who remained head over heels in love with him. Realizing how much wealth he possessed, the king said to him, after having quaffed five or six glasses of wine: "It's up to you whether you want to become my son-in-law or not, Monsieur Marquis."

The marquis, bowing deeply, accepted the honor conferred on him by the king. That very day he married the princess. The cat became a great lord and never again

had to run after mice, except when he wanted to amuse himself.

MORAL

However great the benefit
Of inheriting a tidbit
Handed down from father to son.
Young people with industry
Will prefer using ingenuity
Even if the gains are hard-won.

SECOND MORAL

If a miller's son can have success
In winning the heart of a fair princess
And drawing tender gazes from her,
Then watch how his manner, youth, and dress,
Inspire in her tenderness,
They count for something, you'll concur.