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Book Review: Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Of Cats and Elfin: Short Tales and Fantasies*

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Maud Ellmann

A phoenix, unique of its kind, is captured for an aviary. But the bird's courteous disposition disappoints the customers, who find its classical composure boring. To bring back the crowds, the proprietor, having learned of the phoenix's capacity for regeneration from fire, starves and abuses the bird until it builds its funeral pyre and sets itself alight, burning everything to ashes, including the proprietor and a thousand spectators. No miraculous rebirth occurs.

A goat, tethered to a stake, sympathises with a henpecked publican, tethered to a wife, and shows him how to simulate death by holding a spotted leaf under his tongue. Taking up this tip, the publican lies moribund for three days, eavesdropping on his wife and neighbours as they praise him in death as vigorously as they nagged him in life. Much though he enjoys his sham death, however, the publican does not want to be buried, so he spits out the spotted leaf, knocking on his coffin-lid until the mourners are obliged to set him free. When he dies again, this time for real, 'no one would waste a good word on a fellow who might be alive again within the week' (p. 177), especially one who left his whole fortune to the West of Ireland Goat-Keepers' Association.

These stories from Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Cat's Cradle-Book*, first published in 1940, resemble classic fairy tales in their stark homiletic form; no frills, such as scene-setting or character-development, complicate the anecdote. Apart from 'Bluebeard's Daughter', the grand finale of the collection, the stories are conspicuously short, considerably

shorter than most of Warner's *New Yorker* stories. They stand out for their humour, as well as for their brusque, ironic endings, shorn of consolatory morals. The phoenix never rises from the ashes; the publican dies by consuming the deceitful goat's recipe for immortality, having bequeathed his worldly goods to the welfare of this trickster's kind. In both stories, the absence of an afterlife seems to thematise the one-off, one-dimensional structure of the narratives themselves, which resist secondary meanings just as they foreclose second lives.

Recently published by Handheld Press, *Of Cats and Elfin* (2020) reprints the whole of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Cat's Cradle-Book*, along with several 'elfin' tales previously collected by Susanna Pinney in *One Thing Leading to Another* (1985)¹ but omitted from Warner's 1977 collection *Kingdoms of Elfin*,² which was also recently republished by Handheld Press.³ Both these Handheld editions should help to boost Warner's belated fame by providing a fuller picture of her daredevil imagination. Their publication is particularly timely given the growing academic interest in animal studies and philosophical posthumanism, developments anticipated in Warner's writings from 1940 onwards.

In a much-quoted interview published in *PN Review* in 1981, Warner inveighs against the humanist tradition in fiction, declaring, 'I'm tired of the human heart. I'm tired of the human race. I want to write about something entirely different.'⁴ In fact, she had already begun to write about something entirely different 40 years earlier in *The Cat's Cradle-Book*, a collection of stories supposedly authored by mother cats. In a tongue-in-cheek introduction, the first-person narrator visits a country house, modelled on the house that Warner shared with Valentine Ackland in Norfolk in 1933–34. A handsome young man—evidently based on the feline, sexually ambiguous Ackland—appears out of nowhere, like Satan in *Lolly Willowses*, and educates his visitor about the story-telling culture of cats. Foremost among these feline raconteurs is the Irish 'shanachie' (p. 95) Mrs O'Toady, mother of many of the kittens on the premises who have been suckled on her stories together with her milk. 'The milk flows, and the narrative flows with it' (p. 96).

To attribute these stories exclusively to Mrs O'Toady, however, is to disregard their collective origin and transnational dissemination: 'the culture of cats transcends mere racial accidents' (p. 98), the young man explains to the narrator. Feline storytelling stands for folklore, for the tale of the tribe rather than the single-authored, copyrighted literary text. As Angela Carter argues in her introduction to *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* (1990), folklore consists of 'stories without known originators that can

be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor'.⁵ Similarly, Jack Zipes claims that folk tales represent a 'pre-capitalist folk form' that was transposed by the Grimm brothers and others into a 'bourgeois art form'.⁶ Warner, as a recent convert to the Communist Party, also looked to folklore as a collective art that precedes and exceeds bourgeois individualism. Endlessly transformed in the oral tradition, the folktale is the work of 'Anon', untraceable to any individual source.

Virginia Woolf suspected that 'Anon' was a woman,⁷ but Warner proposes that 'Anon' was a cat, or rather a clowder or a glaring of cats. Perhaps the rarity of these collective nouns reflects the proverbial resistance of cats to being herded, even into categories; a 'glaring' of cats suggests that these solitary creatures come together only to glare at one another. The least communitarian of animals, cats would never collaborate in authorship: think of the cat in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), comically indifferent to the communist aspirations of the barnyard revolution and slinking off whenever called upon to join the workers. Cats' stories are not communal but intergenerational; transmitted by nursing cats, they express the species rather than the individual. Like folktales they are stark and unembellished, a 'mixture of the enchanted and the cruel or chillingly inhuman',⁸ as William Maxwell described the best of Warner's fantastic tales. In the introduction to *The Cat's Cradle-Book*, the young man asks his visitor, 'What is the prevailing mood of these stories we call folk stories? Is it heated and sentimental like the undoubted products of the human imagination—or is it cool and dispassionate... objective—and catlike?' (p. 100).

Catlike they may be, but few of Warner's stories feature cats in starring roles. As the young man explains, playing on Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, 'The proper study of catkind is man.' These creatures glare at us to 'analyse our motives, trace our weaknesses and peculiarities' (p. 101). What distinguishes Warner's stories as feline, then, is not their protagonists – which include a whole menagerie of talking animals – but their sangfroid. In 'Odin's Birds',⁹ for example, two ravens reminisce about the battlefields where the Norse god Odin gathered hero-souls for Valhalla but disregarded his 'poor faithful birds, hopping around the battle-field, worn out with a hard day's flying, and tantalized with the sight of a thousand corpses frozen too hard to be edible' (p. 112). Distracted from their gripes by the smell of human meat, the birds zoom in on the corpse of a handsome youth. A pregnant young woman, 'sighing and shuddering' (p. 114), is trying to drag this body to a shallow grave, which would

deprive the ravens of a tasty carcass. But the birds' luck turns when an older woman gallops up to claim the dead man as her husband. Wife and 'leman' (p. 114) come to blows until the elder, defeated, runs away with the younger in hot pursuit, and the ravens seize the opportunity to divvy up the corpse's eyeballs.

This denouement marks the triumph of feline narrative over sentimental melodrama, which is chased away, along with the romantic rivals. It is worth noting that the corpse's eyes, associated with weeping and weepies, are the first organs to be pecked away by the dry-eyed scavengers. Concerned with their stomachs rather than with souls, Warner's ravens belong to the literary lineage of Sancho Panza, Cervantes's earthy peasant, whose surname means stomach. Like Sancho, these birds serve an aristocratic master, Odin, who idealises the heroic soul, an idealism that evidently leads to carnage. It is the ravens who clean up the mess unleashed by this idealism, devouring the rotting remnants of romantic heroism.

The best-known cat in the folk tradition is Puss-in-Boots, but he figures only obliquely in *The Cat's Cradle-Book*. In Perrault's 'The Master Cat; or, Puss in Boots' (1697), a dying miller bequeaths his meagre possessions to his three sons, the youngest receiving nothing but a cat. When the young man laments this worthless legacy, the cat promises to make his master's fortune. Donning boots, he (or she in earlier iterations of the tale) sets out to hunt for game, which he presents to the king with his master's compliments. This gift, followed by further tasty offerings, persuades the king that the cat's master is a rich man worthy of his daughter's hand in marriage. Thanks to the cat, the pauper therefore ends up as a prince.

In Warner's story 'The Castle of Carabas', Puss-in-Boots makes a comeback in the form of a heraldic crest featuring 'a cat rampant, booted and tached proper' (p. 115). This crest harks back five generations to 'the exploit of the first marquis, who overcame a cat in single combat—but a cat of such gigantic size and hellish cunning and malevolence that the deed was considerably grander than it sounds at first hearing' (p. 115). Although the feline species has been banned from the castle, a cat eventually turns up in a forgotten garret ('as prayers rise to heaven, rubbish rises to the garret' (p. 121), Warner quips) and breaks the long-standing taboo on the family trauma by retelling the story of the ancestral duel from the cat's point of view. 'As the narrative flowed onwards like a black river, its narrator seemed almost to vanish, to be no longer a personality, but instead a cloud of witnesses' (p. 123). Here feline narration stands

for oral folklore, which transcends the personality of any single teller by expressing the genius of the whole 'glaring'.

Some stories in *The Cat's Cradle-Book* smack of allegory, though evading any one-to-one symbolic correspondence. In 'The Magpie Charity', a dying magpie bequeaths his stolen treasures to a charity for indigent cats on the grounds that 'a starving cat is a menace to society' (p. 133). To make the world safe for magpies, he instructs his avian executors to purchase large quantities of mice for cats too wretched to be picky eaters. But the supplicants for this relief turn out to be impostors, either too young, strong, or pretty to qualify, or – typical of the 'deceitfulness of catkind' – to 'have fishbones put away' (p. 134). Only one candidate – aged, blind, deaf, lame, and ugly – presents a convincing case for largesse. His name, Nigger, is likely to offend today's readers, but the affront may be deliberate on Warner's part, since the story has a political sting in its feline tail. Ultimately Nigger is denied a free mouse because his skin is deemed to be worth sixpence in the marketplace. 'Until you have sold your skin,' the birds admonish him, 'we can do nothing for you' (p. 136).

Thus Warner's light-hearted animal fable turns into an indictment of hypocritical philanthropy that requires its beneficiaries to be beyond the reach of help. The story may owe something to Oscar Wilde's 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), which argues that charity is a 'ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise'¹⁰ the private lives of the poor. In Warner's parable, Nigger must sacrifice the only thing he owns – his life – in order to receive the alms he cannot use. By naming him Nigger, Warner is probably alluding to the slave trade whose African victims could not even sell their skins, having no rights to their own bodies.

Several of *The Cat's Cradle-Book* stories satirise religious piety, which is embodied in unlikely animals: a humble tiger and an abstinent fox. In 'Virtue and the Tiger', Warner writes, 'Extremes meet, opposites complement each other, and tigers, it is well known, are irresistibly drawn to the company of hermits' (p. 125). In 'The Fox-Pope', the titular fox, inspired by reading *The Lives of the Saints*, sets himself up as a hermit in the Transylvanian Alps. Here he is approached by two 'cardinals' (birds or prelates?) who, impressed by his reputation for saintliness, urge him to become the Pope. When he refuses the cardinals capture him to smuggle him to Rome. During the voyage the fox, imprisoned in a crate, lets forth a stream of blasphemy, which is overheard by a tipsy stable-boy. Convinced that this foul-mouthed creature must be the devil, the boy releases the

fox to save the Church from a satanic Pope. The liberated fox promptly abandons his religious vocation and, congratulating himself for avoiding spiritual pride, ends up trotting 'quietly towards the henhouse' (p. 141).

This story pays covert tribute to David Garnett's *Lady into Fox*, a 1922 novella much admired by Warner in which a lady turns into a vixen and resists her husband's efforts to keep her human, growing foxier with every hour. Likewise, Warner's virtuous tiger reverts to his natural ferocity: 'Filled with apostolic wrath and apostolic disillusionment, the tiger stalked through the village, smiting and tearing at anything that crossed his path' (p. 130). Unlike the fox-pope, however, the tiger is ultimately defeated by virtue. When he is just about to devour his spiritual mentor, this hermit cries, 'Receive my virtue' (p. 130), and the tiger, exhausted by years of saintly forbearance, folds his paws and dies. These animal fables suggest a Nietzschean disdain for Christian morality, which makes a virtue of humility and passivity. In Warner's parables, this morality suppresses the animal's natural inclinations without transforming them: eventually the tiger reverts to violence, the fox to cunning, repudiating the ethics of self-mortification. Except ... that Warner complicates this tidy allegory: the tiger, far from burning bright, collapses under the influence of virtue, leaving the hermit unscathed and 'pondering on the inexorable harmonies of the universe' (p. 131).

In 'Popularity', Warner also subverts the expectation of a takeaway moral, namely the bromide that 'being yourself' makes you lovable. A wolf asks one creature after another how to be popular, and each advocates the charms of its own species: the dog advises tail-wagging, the cat purring, the sheep grass-eating, the blackbird singing, while the lion tells the wolf to practise dignity and wear a mane. At last a wise owl counsels the wolf to be as wolfish as possible. But the wolf becomes even more unpopular when he casts off his false selves to be true to his wolfish nature; indeed, his integrity brings about his death, for the farmers take up arms against this pest and finish him off. This parable, like others in *The Cat's Cradle-Book*, creates the expectation of a moral ending only to ridicule this wishful thinking. 'Cool and dispassionate' (p. 100), the stories tease readers like a cat with a mouse, playing us along only to gobble up our suppositions in a ruthless dead end. As the young man warns the narrator in the introduction, 'don't run away with the idea that these stories have anything in common with the ordinary moral tales, the ordinary web-footed propaganda' (p. 96).

'Bluebeard's Daughter', the final story in *The Cat's Cradle-Book*, anticipates the feminist project of revising the fairy-tale canon undertaken

by writers such as Anne Sexton and Angela Carter. But Warner's story scarcely conforms to contemporary standards of wokeness. Instead, we are told that the arch-misogynist Bluebeard was 'a good father', a saving grace that historians have suppressed lest it 'spoil the symmetry of a bad husband' (p. 196). Warner even makes the hilarious suggestion that Bluebeard's wife-murders were motivated by 'his anxiety to find the ideal stepmother' (p. 196) for his daughter Djamila.

In Perrault's classic 1697 version of the tale, Bluebeard gives his young bride the keys to his castle, inviting her to open every room but one. Inevitably she succumbs to curiosity and opens the forbidden door only to discover a charnel house, filled with the gory remains of Bluebeard's previous wives. Her disobedience discovered, the bride is about to suffer her predecessors' fate when she is rescued by her brothers, who run their swords through the serial killer, enabling his widow to enjoy his wealth. In Angela Carter's feminist twist, the bride's Amazonian mother, galloping up to the castle on her rearing steed, dispatches the villain with a bullet to his blue-bearded head.¹¹

In an appended moral, Perrault interprets this fable as a warning against maidenish curiosity. But Warner flips this gender stereotype, attributing insatiable curiosity to the husband rather than the wife. In Warner's version, Djamila's husband Kayel bursts into the forbidden room and tumbles down a flight of marble steps, breaking his collarbone. The only blood in this chamber is the snooper's: there are no skeletons in this closet. Despite Kayel's ominous mishap, the spouses, realising that they cannot relinquish curiosity, resolve to 'sublimate' it in the study of astronomy. 'To this day, though Bluebeard's daughter is forgotten, the wife of Kayel the Astronomer is held in remembrance' (p. 214), not for her blue hair but for her sympathetic collaboration with her husband's research into the Saturnian rings.

Warner's elfin tales share the cool insouciance of *The Cat's Cradle-Book* and its resistance to what Leo Bersani calls 'the culture of redemption',¹² which promulgates the common platitude that art's purpose is to offer consolation for life's miseries. Elves, according to Warner, have no truck with pity, and her stories emulate their pitiless protagonists, eschewing the human heart in favour of dry wit and dazzling inventiveness. Describing the book to William Maxwell, Warner wrote: 'there is practically no flesh on it at all, and no breath of human kindness. But it seems to me that the bones live.'¹³ Warner's elves and fairies – the terms are virtually interchangeable – differ sharply from the cute, Disneyfied creatures of today's popular culture; on the contrary, her sprites are sly,

unsentimental, atheist, amoral. If *The Cat's Cradle-Book* reflects Warner's conversion to communism and her interest in proletarian and pre-capitalist narrative, her elfin kingdoms are anything but communist utopias. 'Elfindom is an aristocratic society' (p. 5), Warner declares, and her elfin stories focus on the upper echelons of this society, especially the queens and their Machiavellian courtiers. Elfin monarchs are always female, not because of any allegiance to feminism but because their (misnamed) 'kingdoms' are beehives, thronged with drones and buzzing with intrigue.

Elves have no work ethic: thieves and scavengers, they live on stolen goods and loot from shipwrecks. Their pillage is facilitated by their wings – though aristocratic fairies rarely deign to fly¹⁴ – as well as by their power of invisibility, switched on and off at will. Many menial tasks are performed by changelings, abducted as babies and 'inhumanized' by a 'blood-to-ichor transfer', in which their mortal blood, sucked out by weasels, is replaced by an elixir of longevity. Though prolonging their lives, this transfer fails to protect them from old age, and 'when grey hairs appear on the head of a changeling he is put out of the hill to make the rest of his way through the human world; which is why we see so many grey-haired beggars on the roads' (p. 2).

Because they have no souls, elves have no afterlife, though they live approximately twice as long as humans. While the 'notion of a God is an inherent fever in mortals' (p. 32), elves are immune to this divine busybody who doles out rewards and punishments like a schoolmaster or a bad novelist. 'Untrammelled by that petted plague of mortals, conscience' (p. 68), elves feel neither reproach nor regret, nor do they enter into explanations or tell lies. No more does Warner as a storyteller enter into explanations about elfin character and culture but allows the action to reveal the mores of this parallel world.

An exception is the essay 'The Kingdom of Elfin', reprinted in *Of Cats and Elphins*, which explains that fairies hold 'a very poor opinion of humankind', regarding us as 'shocking boors, uncouth, noisy, ill-bred and disgustingly oversized' (p. 2). Such yahoos are best employed as nursemaids, since fairy-mothers, though devoted to their offspring, lack the 'domestic temper' to take care of them:

As some human mothers believe that the most devoted nurses are to be found among the less sophisticated races – an ayah, an amah, or a Coal-black Mammy – so do the fairies think that the plodding and bovine nature of human-kind is peculiarly well-adapted to provide reliable old-fashioned nurses for fairy babes. (p. 4)

This sentence – like the name Nigger assigned to the indigent cat – is hard to take, at least if we take it literally. In an apologetic footnote, editor Kate MacDonald proposes that the sentence may be ‘an ironic quotation’ (p. 216), which, given Warner’s propensity to free indirect discourse, is a plausible interpretation. In this reading, elfin anti-humanism could be understood as a satire of human racism: both prejudices animalise the targets of their contempt, dismissing the despised group as ‘plodding and bovine’. Were she writing today, Warner would probably have avoided such red flags. If these gaffes – dated as they are – cause a shudder or two, they count for little against Warner’s avowed anti-racism and egalitarianism.

To reiterate, Handheld Press has done a great service to Warner scholars and to literary history by reprinting the treasures in *Of Cats and Elfins*. That said, the text is spattered with misprints and MacDonald’s footnotes are somewhat haphazard: the first of these identifies Blake as ‘presumably the poet and visionary William Blake (1757–1827)’ (p. 215) but neglects to source Warner’s quotation of Blake’s famous account of a fairy funeral.¹⁵ Readers may wonder if words like ‘bovine’, ‘spittoon’ and ‘bolster’ require annotation; they may also regret the paucity of bibliographic information. Nonetheless the footnotes provide a useful head start for readers intrigued by the intertextual dimension of the elfin kingdoms. Warner acknowledges predecessors such as the poets Robert Wace and George Waldron and the folklorist Robert Kirk; she also quotes from Margaret Murray’s *The Witch-Cult in Eastern Europe* (1921), an important source for *Lolly Willowses*. In addition to these overt sources, the elfin tales also contain echoes of W.B. Yeats, Constance Wilde, J.M. Barrie, Lord Dunsany and many others. Just as Elfindom exists aslant of the human world, so the fantastic literature of elves and fairies exists aslant of the dominant English literary tradition, making sly forays into realist fiction. Warner writes: ‘if we fail to see the fairies it is not because we are too stupid to see them, but because they are too clever to allow themselves to be seen by us’ (p. 2). Perhaps the same could be said of the fantastic fairies lurking in the workaday conventions of realism. As for Warner, once she ventured into the kingdoms of Elfin she never looked back: ‘I don’t want to write a respectable, realist story ever again!’¹⁶

Note on Contributor

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Notes

- 1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *One Thing Leading to Another and Other Stories*, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Women's Press, 1985).
- 2 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Kingdoms of Elfin* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2018).
- 3 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Cat's Cradle-Book* (New York: Viking Press, 1940); Warner, *One Thing Leading to Another and Other Stories*.
- 4 Val Warner and Michael Schmidt, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in conversation', *PN Review* 8, no. 3 (1981), p. 36.
- 5 Angela Carter, *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), p. ix.
- 6 Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical theories of folk and fairy tales*, 2nd edn (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002), p. 20, quoted in Mary Kaiser, 'Fairy tale as sexual allegory: Intertextuality in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14, no. 3 (1994), p. 30.
- 7 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch. 3, p. 37. For Woolf's unfinished essay 'Anon', see Brenda Silver, "'Anon" and "The Reader": Virginia Woolf's last essays', *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, nos 3/4 (1979), pp. 356–441; Woolf's manuscript of 'Anon' is transcribed on pp. 380–98.
- 8 See Maxwell's letter to Warner of 13 December 1973 in Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell, 1938–1978*, ed. Michael Steinman (Washington: Counterpoint, 2001), p. 268.
- 9 In the Introduction to *The Cat's Cradle-Book*, the narrator remarks that 'Odin's Birds' is closely related to 'the ballad of The Twa Corbies' (p. 97).
- 10 <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>.
- 11 Angela Carter, 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979), in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 2006).
- 12 Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- 13 Letter from Warner to Maxwell, 20 November 1970, in Warner, *The Element of Lavishness*, p. 215.
- 14 See 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in Conversation', p. 36: 'no well-bred fairy would ever dream of flying; they leave that to the servants'.
- 15 William Maxwell quotes this story about Blake in the letter to Warner of 13 December 1973, in Warner, *The Element of Lavishness*, pp. 267–8.
- 16 Warner and Schmidt, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in conversation', p. 36.

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