

### ***Puss In Boots: An Analysis of Feline Footwear***

#### *Introduction*

Throughout history, the theme of the animal helper is prevalent in the fairytales of various cultures. In Aarne and Thompson's folktale classification scheme, tale type 545B "The Cat as Helper" follows the general motif of an inherited cat who helps his master gain great fortune and win the hand of a princess. Eastern variations of tale type 545B cast a fox in the helpful animal role. In the Central Asian tradition, a fox introduces a young man, who lost all his riches upon falling into a river, as a suitor to the Khan's daughter. The fox must then prove the man's wealth by trapping animals and securing land and a residence. The Middle Region's tradition also includes a fox, however this fox borrows scales from the king that are returned with gold pieces, silver coins, or grain "carelessly" left in the scales.

Many of us are far more familiar with the translations that have been handed down through the Western cultures. These versions feature a cat in the role of the animal helper, and follow the same general plot as their Eastern counterparts. Regardless of the animal cast in the helper role, there is a one theme that is remarkably consistent; the cunning animal must make their owner of humble origin appear to have endless riches.

As the tale migrated westward, it was famously adapted and printed by Charles Perrault in 1697's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités: Contes de ma mère l'Oye*, or *Stories or Tales from Times Past, with Morals: Tales of Mother Goose*. Perrault's version of the tale is similar to its Italian predecessors, versions written by Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giovanni Battista Basile. Though structurally similar

to Straparola and Basile, Perrault's version was the first to introduce the boots that would become the defining feature of all subsequent "Cat as Helper" tales.

Many ideas exist regarding why Charles Perrault first introduced a pair of boots to this particular tale. On the surface, the boots serve no apparent purpose. Perrault offers no explanation of why this cat needs boots, though modern retellings have presented reasons ranging from a need for protection from briar patches to outright vanity. By examining the symbolism and literature surrounding shoes and boots, and looking at the historical context in which Perrault was writing, we may be able to gain an understanding of the introduction of feline footwear. However, in order to understand Puss's boots, we must first understand the person that was Charles Perrault and the people and events that helped shape and guide his life and work.

### *The Life of Charles Perrault*

Perrault was born January 12, 1628 to a highly distinguished bourgeois family. The youngest of five successful sons, Charles studied law despite his passion for poetry and prose. He abandoned the legal profession to work as a clerk for his brother Pierre, a tax collector, while he focused on his writing. In 1660 he published two pieces, one of which captured the attention of Jean Baptiste Colbert, the Minister of Finance for Louis XIV and arguably the most influential Minister in Louis XIV's government. Three years later Perrault was appointed secretary to Colbert, who continually praised and promoted his works within government. Through his position he was able to accomplish a great deal in the arts and sciences, establishing quite the reputation as a gifted poet and essayist. In 1671 Perrault was elected to the Académie Française (French Academy), which allowed Perrault to fulfill his

personal goal of being taken as a serious academic writer, despite some members of the Academy viewing him as a mouthpiece for Colbert.

In 1672 Perrault was promoted to Controller of His Majesty's Buildings, a position he was awarded through his merits even though it was a post usually purchased. In the same year, Perrault also married Marie Guichon, a marriage that did not please Colbert. Perrault's continued position in the government took a bleak turn as strains resulting from Louis XIV's incessant warring pushed Perrault and Colbert further apart. Finally, in 1682 Perrault was forced to resign his position as Controller of His Majesty's Buildings in favor of Colbert's son, and in 1683 Jean Baptiste Colbert died. His dismissal from government service earned him a handsome pension that allowed him to focus on literary affairs, and Perrault remained a member of the French Academy.

In 1687, Perrault published the poem "The Century of Louis the Great" and read the piece aloud to the members of the French Academy. The poem endlessly praised Louis XIV, suggesting that France under Louis XIV rivaled and surpassed all previous ages, and that modern art and literature were worthy rivals to ancient masterpieces. This single reading sparked one of the greatest literary debates in history, the "Querrelle des Anciens et des Modernes", or the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns. Perrault's poem caused members of the Academy to take one of two sides. One side defended the position that ancient accomplishments represented the height of civilization, and that France should imitate the great Empires of Greece and Rome by maintaining stringent classical rules. Those who sided with Perrault believed that modern works were proof of a more enlightened and superior era, and that France and Christianity could progress only through the incorporation of pagan beliefs and folklore. During the Quarrel, Perrault published the *Parallèle des*

*Anciens et des Modernes*, a four part prose piece comparing the accomplishments of each side. *Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes* follows a conversation between a “Présidente” who supports the ancients, an “Abbé” supportive of the moderns, and a “Chevalier” who takes the middle road (it should come as no surprise that the Abbé was the winner of these debates). In 1697, the same year that Perrault released the *Contes*, Louis XIV officially ended the debate by announcing his support for the Ancients. For ten years Perrault dedicated his life to defending the Modern position, and though he did not officially continue the debate, his position remained unchanged until his death in 1703.

#### *Puss's Boots: Symbolism and Other Literary Works*

Perrault's life had a profound impact on his works, with the majority of his written work being of scholarly distinguished. Yet Charles Perrault collected and manipulated several stories for instructing children at a time when his own children were far too old for the work. More specifically, Perrault took these tales and added whimsical touches to the tales, one of which was a seemingly insignificant pair of boots for a not at all insignificant cat.

According to the *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore, and Symbols* (Jobes, 1962) shoes symbolize (among other things) prosperity, recognition, servitude, and reverence, with the Anglo-Saxons using shoes to represent a transfer of authority at the time of marriage. The *Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend* (Leach, 1950) points out that some cultures believed (as some still do) shoes should be removed in sacred places or in the presence of royalty.

The symbolism of shoes could have multiple implications for our feline friend. Considered one way, the boots may symbolize that Puss is one whom we should respect and who has authority. The proper title of Perrault's Puss in Boots is *Le Maître Chat ou le Chate Botté*, translated in English to *The Master Cat, or Puss in Boots*. Puss does not earn the title "Master Cat" from Perrault until later in the story, after the King has met the Marquis of Carabas, but Puss earns the respect of the miller's son as soon as he dons his signature boots. Even though Puss refers to the miller's son as "master", the boots lend authority to Puss as he becomes a capitalized "Cat" rather than an everyday tomcat. Previously preparing himself for a feast of feline, the master gives Puss the boots he requested and is now following Puss's every command. In this case, the master giving Puss the pair of boots is representative of the symbolic transfer of authority from the seemingly more intelligent and capable miller's son to the truly intelligent and capable cat. Some versions even take this transfer of power quite literally, as the miller's son gives Puss the boots off of his own two feet, though Perrault's version does not specify where the boots were obtained.

As Jeanne Morgan (1985) points out, visits to the King was a privilege granted to only the most important nobles, yet Puss gains access to His Royal Majesty with ease, and the King shows Puss a surprising amount of respect. The boots certainly aided Puss in his ability to meet the King, who shows no surprise at receiving a cat. The boots, serving as a symbol of prosperity (for surely a Marquis with such a well-dressed servant must be very wealthy), allow the King to ignore the fact that he is meeting with a mere cat. Additionally, the boots never leave Puss's feet in the presence of the King, placing Puss as an equal to royalty, despite his humble approach. Finally, the boots also serve as a tool for recognition from the King, setting Puss apart from any other ordinary tabby he may encounter.

This is certainly not the first time that shoes have been used to help make a character stand out above and beyond the others. In Perrault's *Cendrillon (Cinderella)*, glass slippers serve as a recognition tool for the poor Cinderella. Cinderella's shoes are also one of the main ingredients in her recipe for fame, fortune, love and happiness. If Perrault's intentions were to use Puss's boots as a symbol of future prosperity in the same vein as Cinderella's slippers, then it is possible that he may have drawn inspiration for the boots from other tales as well. Other types of identifiable clothing are used in other tales from Perrault's *Contes*. In *Le Petit Chaperon rouge* we see a red riding hood, another Perrault invention. *La Barbe bleue* features a man with a very recognizable blue beard. In *Le petit Poucet* the ogre recognizes his seven daughter's by the seven gold crowns that grace their seven heads.

Morna Daniels (2002) believes the most obvious explanation for Puss's boots lies within Perrault's tale *Le petit Poucet (Little Thumb)*, though not because of the theme of recognizable clothing. In *Little Thumb* the ogre's magical seven-league boots allow him to travel long distances very quickly. After taking the boots from the ogre, the hero wears the boots to carry messages between the King and his army, much like Hermes's winged sandals enabled him to quickly carry messages for the Greek gods.

However, the link between the boots in *Puss In Boots* and *Little Thumb* seems coincidental at best. The feline footwear carries no magical connotations, unless we consider their being cat-sized being magical. While they may aid Puss in gaining access to the King, they certainly don't give that access at an accelerated speed like those in *Little Thumb*. The boots also have no bearing on Puss's agenda, which is not one of messenger, but rather that of match-maker. While boots figure prominently in both tales, there seems to be no logical connection between the two distinct pairs of boots, and it seems a weak explanation for why

Perrault would have added something as mundane as a pair of boots to a tale where none existed prior. Daniels's theory is one that relies on a moment of spontaneity that is contradictory to the deliberate and strategic style of writing that characterizes the majority of Perrault's writing. One could just as effectively argue that the boots were added because of *Cinderella*, but that argument seems equally uncharacteristic of Charles Perrault.



[Figure 1]

If we were to take a nod from Philip Lewis (1996), the boots would be explained as a way to further humanize the anthropomorphic Master Cat. In all of the *Contes*, only one other animal is humanized – the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*. By placing boots on Puss, he becomes more human than the lupine terrorist by showing that he is refined aristocratic cat. If we examine the engraving from the original head piece for Perrault's *Puss in Boots* [Figure 1], we will see an oddly humanistic feline. The cat has a child-like

face and toes that are much longer than the average feline. The boots may simply serve to add to the credibility of a talking cat.

Thus far, explanations based on symbolism and other literary shoes come across as superficial and cursory. Perrault's *Puss in Boots* was written in a historically fascinating setting from an author whose life was full of controversial debates over literary quality. A more thorough explanation of Puss's boots can be found by analyzing the political and cultural atmosphere that surrounded the life of Charles Perrault.

*Puss's Boots: A Thoroughly Modern, Thoroughly French Subtlety*

Despite the preface of the *Contes* claiming the works were to be used for the instruction of children, Perrault's actions surrounding the *Contes* lead one to believe that he never truly intended the *Contes* for children, but rather the tales were written for his peers in the literary salons. Two of the tales were initially read aloud to the Academy in 1691, during the time of the Quarrel. Other tales were reworked and released between 1693 and 1697. The collected tales were published in 1697, released under the name of Perrault's son, Pierre Perrault Darmancour, and dedicated to the nineteen year old niece of Louis XIV. Perhaps this was an attempt to mask Perrault's identity so as to not be blamed for reigniting the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns at a time when Louis XIV was clearly supporting the Ancients. Perhaps the tale was dedicated to Louis XIV's niece in a last ditch attempt to change his beloved King's mind and persuade him to support the Moderns. It is equally likely that it was a carefully calculated move to bring adult attention to the tales which would subtly further his agenda while not directly opposing Louis XIV. Just as the *Parallèle* was a fictional work that served to promote Perrault's beliefs, the *Contes* is a collection of tales that were manipulated to appeal to a higher social class by being written in a way that was thoroughly modern and thoroughly French.

While Perrault's *Contes* could certainly be used as moral instruction for children, they can also be viewed as a work that is reflective of the social, political, and cultural times in which Perrault wrote, in addition to serving as a further commentary on Perrault's views of the merit of modern literary works. The boots in Perrault's version of *Puss in Boots* is a prime example of the way his work reflects those values.

The most important difference between the classical fairy tales and Perrault's modern versions were the affixed morals, which were reflective of French civility. The second moral affixed to *Puss in Boots* expresses the importance of outward appearance in gaining status, and that with the proper clothing even a miller's son can gain the affection of a princess. Perrault wrote this story during a time where fashion was a royal preoccupation in a way that had not been yet seen in France.

Prior to the reign of Louis XIV, Italy was the center of European fashion. Detailed lace, fine silk ribbons, and buttons generously adorned each piece of clothing. Extravagant dress was encouraged by Louis XIV, whose court was full of luxury and elegance and whose love of elaborate costume is legendary. In 1665, two years after Charles Perrault became secretary to Jean Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV and his Minister of Finance established the first lace factory in France. Colbert also recognized the importance of silk manufacturing to the fashion industry, and through royal patronage was able to bring skilled Italian craftsmen to Lyons to establish a silk industry. With such an intimate knowledge of the Louis XIV's fondness for fashion, it only seems logical that the King in Perrault's modern tales would be equally preoccupied by fine clothing.

One particularly noteworthy aspect of seventeenth century fashion is the popularity of boots. Boots, worn both indoors and outdoors, with spurs, and their large tops folded down upon themselves, were considered a favorable surface for displaying elegantly trimmed boot hose. A fine pair of boots was a sign of distinction even before Louis

XIV's reign, with his father (who reigned during Charles Perrault's younger years) donning the boots regularly. An etching by Abraham Bosse [Figure 2] shows Louis XIII on his throne wearing the wide topped boots. Boots were also immensely popular among the gentlemanly cavaliers in France. The painting by Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier [Fig. 3] depicts a cavalier during the time of Louis XIV, wearing boots that were higher than those of Louis XIII's.



[Figure 2]

The popularity of boots in the seventeenth century and the importance of fashion to Perrault's employer and King may be the root of Perrault's choice for feline footwear. Puss's boots clearly identify him as a member of the aristocracy. By adding boots to the title character, Perrault was able to shape his identity as an individual who is not to be ignored. This further perpetuates Perrault's moral that the clothes make the man, or in this



[Figure 3]

case, the cat. It also serves as a bitter commentary on court life, where personal merit is ignored in favor of wealth, fashion, and reputation, a blow that Perrault personally experienced when he was removed from his service as Controller of His Majesty's Buildings in favor of Colbert's son.

In addition to characterizing Puss as a member of high society, the boots also characterize Puss as being a member of modern French society. As evidenced by his

footwear, Puss is a cat who is up to date on the latest French fashions. His speaking manner is also distinguished, which further shows the Master Cat as a member of the gentry. By putting the trendy shoes on the main character, Perrault deliberately directs the attention to the fact that the Master Cat is not from a bygone era, but rather living in the here and now.

### *Conclusion*

Perrault was an established academic, who was known for his poems addressed to royalty. He was a man of great personal ambition who possessed the ability to anticipate and at times manipulate the reactions of other. Three years after the *Contes* were released, Perrault released the second volume of a series of short biographies, a work that praised the modern achievements in areas such as art and science. With so much of Perrault's life devoted to furthering the Modern's point of view, it is inevitable, if not deliberate that his tales would include this facet of his writing.

It would be naïve to believe that the *Contes* were not a venue for Perrault's Modern agenda, despite his introduction placing the work as being merely moral instruction. Boots were added because Perrault firmly believed fashion to be an important part of how far one can go in life, and that this modern moral was superior to the morals presented in antiquity. It was certainly a belief that helped Perrault in his life. Although born of lawyers, he obtained positions that were otherwise bought and sold through his ability to appeal to those above him.

Perhaps Perrault meant for his *Contes* to serve as indirect evidence of the way modern works were better than their classical counterparts. Perrault believed that modern

works were inherently better than ancient works, because they had been improved upon by a more enlightened mind. Simply by including the instructive moral, Perrault was, in his mind, elevating the tales above their classical counterparts. Boots were not present in previous versions of the tale, because there was previously no need to distinguish the tale from its predecessors. Puss's boots are what made him a thoroughly modern, thoroughly French Master Cat.

## **Bibliography**

- Bigelow, M. S. (1970). *Fashion in History: Apparel in the Western World*. Burgess Publishing Company: Minneapolis, MN.
- Bosse, Abraham "Le Prévôt des Marchands : Frontispiece to La triomphante réception du roi", 1612-1676. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. Accessed online through ARTstor.
- Daniels, M. (2002). "The Tale of Charles Perrault and *Puss in Boots*." *The Electronic British Library Journal*. Accessed online, April 1, 2007 at <http://www.bl.uk/collections/eblj/2002/article5.html>
- Evans, M. (1950). *Costume throughout the Ages*. J.B. Lippincott Company: Philadelphia, PA.
- Jobes, G. (1962). *Dictionary of Mythology Folklore and Symbols*. The Scarecrow Press, Inc.: New York, NY.
- Kaplanoglou, M. (1999). "AT 545B "Puss in Boots" and "The Fox-Matchmaker": From the Central Asian to European Tradition". *Folklore*. Vol. 100, pp. 57-62.
- Kybalová, L., et al. (1968). *The Pictorial Encyclopedia of Fashion*. Crown Publishers, Inc.: New York, NY.
- Leach, M. (1950). *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend*. Funk & Wagnalls Company: New York, NY.
- Lewis, P. (1996). *Seeing Through the Mother Goose Tales: Visual Turns in the Writings of Charles Perrault*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA.

- Malarte, C. (1985). "Structure and Structural Components in 'Le Chat Botté'". *Folklore*. Vol. 96, No. 1. pp. 104-111.
- Meissonier, Jean-Louis Ernest "A Cavalier: time of Louis XIV" 1856, Wallace Collection. Accessed online at <http://tinyurl.com/ywrfds>
- Morgan, J. (1985). *Perrault's Morals for Moderns*. Peter Lang: New York, NY.
- Murphy, M. (1949). *Two Centuries of French Fashion*. The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences Museum: New York, NY.
- Payne, B. (1965). *History of Costume: From the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. Harper & Row, Publishers: New York, NY.
- Tatar, M. (2002). *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York, NY.
- Thelander, D.R. (1982). "Mother Goose and Her Goslings: The France of Louis XIV as Seen through the Fairy Tale". *Journal of Modern History*. Vol. 54, pp. 467-496.
- Zipes, J., et al. (2004). *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature: The Traditions in English*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York, NY.