Joanna Baillie, “The Kitten”

Baillie (1762 – 1851) was a Scottish poet and playwright, esteemed by the literary establishment of her time while also enjoying a fair measure of popular success; she was also well-known for mentoring many struggling writers. Baillie, who never married and spent much of her adult life living with her sister, was a lifelong lover of cats.

This poem – which traces the arc of feline life from kittenhood, when crazy antics amuse families (ranging from the solitary scholar to the “rustic,” or rural, family), until adulthood, when cats are often ignored or treated poorly – was first published in 1810, in Sir Walter Scott's anthology *English Minstrelsy*, vol. 2. (Edinburgh: Ballantyne).

Wanton droll,º whose harmless play  
Beguiles the rustic's closing day,  
When drawn the evening fire about, 
Sit aged Crone and thoughtless Lout,º  
And child upon his three-foot stool,  
Waiting until his supper cool;  
And maid, whose cheek outblooms the rose,  
As bright the blazing faggotº glows,  
Who, bending to the friendly light,  
Plies her task with busy sleight;º  
Come, show thy tricks and sportive graces, 
Thus circled round with merry faces.

Backward coil’d, and crouching low, 
With glaring eye-balls watch thy foe, 
The housewife’s spindle whirling round, 
Or thread, or straw, that on the ground 
Its shadow throws, by urchinº sly 
Held out to lure thy roving eye; 
Then, stealing onward, fiercely spring 
Upon the futile, faithless thing. 
Now, wheeling round, with bootlessº skill,  
Thy bo-peep tail¹ provokes thee still, 
As still beyond thy curving side 
Its jetty tip is seen to glide; 
Till, from thy centre starting far, 
Thou sidelong rear’st, with rump in air 
Erected stiff, and gait awry, 
Like madam in her tantrums high:² 
Though ne’er a madam of them all 
Whose silken kirtleº sweeps the hall, 
More varied trick and whim displays 
To catch the admiring stranger’s gaze.

Doth power in measured verses dwell, 
All thy vagaries wild to tell? 
Ah no! the start, the jet,º the bound, 
º a playful, humorous being
º uncultured person, a bumpkin
º bundle of sticks used for fuel
º manual dexterity; the maid is sewing
º young boy
º pointless, unavailing
º gown or petticoat
º a sudden movement, a springing up

¹ “bo-peep” is an old British term for the game of “peek-a-boo”; here it refers to the cat chasing its tail, which as the cat spins around it will sometimes see and sometimes lose sight of.
² A depiction of a cat abruptly leaving its play and walking stiffly away from an object in which it is suddenly pretending it has no interest – a common feline behavior. Lines 29-32 remark that the kitten is better than any woman at getting peoples’ attention.
The giddy scamper round and round,
With leap, and jerk, and high curvet,₉
And many a whirling somerset,₉
(Permitted by the modern muse
Expression technical to use)
These mock the deftest rhymester's skill,
But poor in art, though rich in will.

The featest⁰ tumbler, stage-bedight,⁰
To thee is but a clumsy wight,⁰
Who every limb and sinew strains
To do what costs thee little pains,
For which, I trow, the gaping crowd
Requites⁰ him oft with plaudits⁰ loud.
But, stopp'd the while thy wanton play,
Applauses, too, thy feats repay:
For then, beneath some urchin's hand
With modest pride thou tak'st thy stand,
While many a stroke of fondness glides
Along thy back and tabby sides.
Dilated swells thy glossy fur,
And loudly croons thy busy purr;
As, timing well the equal sound,
Thy clutching feet bepat the ground,
And all their harmless claws disclose,
Like prickles of an early rose;
While softly from thy whisker'd cheek
Thy half-closed eyes peer mild and meek.

But, not alone by cottage fire
Do rustics rude⁰ thy feats admire;
The learned sage, whose thoughts explore
The widest range of human lore,
Or, with unfetter'd fancy, fly
Through airy heights of poesy,
Pausing smiles with altered air
To see thee climb his elbow-chair,
Or, struggling on the mat below,
Hold warfare with his slipper'd toe.
The widow'd dame or lonely maid,
Who, in the still, but cheerless shade
Of home unsocial,⁰ spends her age,
And rarely turns a letter'd page;
Upon her hearth for thee lets fall
The rounded cork, or paper ball,
Nor chides thee on thy wicked watch
The ends of ravell'd skein to catch,
But lets thee have thy wayward will,
Perplexing oft her better skill.

E'en he, whose mind of gloomy bent,
In lonely tower or prison pent,
Reviews the coil⁰ of former days,
And loathes the world and all its ways;
What time the lamp’s unsteady gleam
Hath roused him from his moody dream,
Feels, as thou gambol’st round his seat,
His heart of pride less fiercely beat,
And smiles, a link in thee to find
That joins it still to living kind.

Whence hast thou then, thou witlessº puss!  º non-rational
The magic power to charm us thus?
Is it, that in thy glaring eye,
And rapid movements, we descry,º imagine that we see
Whilst we at ease, secure from ill,
The chimney corner snugly fill,
A lion, darting on the prey,
A tyger, at his ruthless play?
Or is it that in thee we trace,
With all thy varied wanton grace,
An emblem view’d with kindred eye,
Of tricksy, restless infancy?
Ah! many a lightly sportive child,
Who hath, like thee, our wits beguil’d,
To dull and sober manhood grown,
With strange recoil our hearts disown.

Even so, poor K it! must thou endure,
When thou becom’st a cat demure,
Full many a cuff and angry word,
Chidº roughly from the tempting board.ºº table set with food
And yet, for that thou hast, I ween,
So oft our favour’d playmate been,
Soft be the change which thou shalt prove,
When time hath spoiled thee of our love,
Still be thou deem’d, by housewife fat,
A comely, careful, mousing cat,
Whose dish is, for the public good,
Replenish’d oft with savoury food,

Nor, when thy span of life is past,
Be thou to pond or dunghill cast,
But gently borne on good man’s spade,
Beneath the decent sod be laid,
And children show, with glist’ning eyes,
The place where poor old Pussy lies.

Through this Poem was written before the publication of Mr. Wordsworth’s last volumes, no part of which, either in manuscript or any other form, the writer of this had ever seen, there is certainly a similarity in some of its thoughts to his very pleasing poem of the Kitten and the Fallen Leaves. [Baillie’s note] Wordsworth’s poem “The Kitten and Falling Leaves” was first published in 1807.