

The Tale of *Puss in Boots* (2004)

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The character of *Puss in Boots* (or *The Master Cat*) has often been the theme of postage stamps, and several have been used to illustrate the story here.

Background in brief

The origins of the story, which is also sometimes known as *The Master Cat*, go back a long way.

In about 1530 the nursery tale *Le Chat Botté* was published in Italy as no. XI of Straparola's tales in *The Delightful Nights*, and tells of the cat procuring his master Constantine a fine castle and the king's heiress. It was translated from the Italian into French in 1585 as one of a collection of eight short stories published in 1697 under the title *Stories or Tales from the Past, with Morals* (*Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités*), subtitled *Tales of Mother Goose* (*Contes de ma mère l'oye*).

They were written down by the Frenchman Charles Perrault (1628–1703), but they aren't his original stories: all the tales were part of a storytelling tradition that had been continuing for a long time before Perrault's lifetime. The other titles in the set – some also very well-known – are *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Bluebeard*, *The Fairies*, *Cinderella*, *Ricky of the Tuft* and *Tom Thumb*. Perrault actually published the stories under the name of his son Pierre, but it is he who is known for them — and, it has to be said, he is far better-known for these than for his other, weightier literary efforts.



1968 stamps from East Germany showing the story in brief

From France the story reached England, was translated into English in 1729 and became known here as *Puss in Boots*. There are three other fairy tales written by Perrault that were published slightly earlier, in the earlier 1690s: these are *Griselda*, *The Ridiculous Wishes*, and *The Donkey's Skin*.

There's a most comprehensive account of the story and its history at the [It's Behind You](https://www.itshistory.com/) site.

The story

The miller's bequests

A miller had three sons. When he died, his inheritance to them consisted of his mill, his donkey and his cat: that was all. It would have cost far too much to hire anyone, such as a lawyer, to administer this meagre estate; so the eldest son inherited the mill, the second the donkey, and the youngest just the cat. The latter was very upset at having received so little. He felt that his two older brothers could join together and make quite a good living; but he could only eat his cat, make a muff from his skin — and then he would die of hunger.



Disney interpretation of the miller's three sons and their inheritances on a 1982 miniature sheet from the Grenadines of St Vincent

The cat heard all this, but pretended not to. Instead he said to his master, 'Don't be so worried, master. Just give me a bag with drawstrings that I can close, and make me a pair of boots, so that I can get through the mud and brambles more easily, and then I think you'll find you aren't quite so badly off with me as you believe at the moment.' His master didn't want to set too much store by this optimism, but had seen the cat play some very clever tricks to outwit and catch rats and mice — so he agreed to provide what was asked and see what happened.

Puss begins his scheme

Given the things he had requested, the cat pulled on the boots, put some bran and greens into the bag, slung it around his neck and, keeping the neck of the bag closed, went to a field where he knew there were plenty of rabbits. He loosened the neck of the bag before stretching himself out as though he were dead, and waited for some young rabbits, unacquainted with the ways of the world, to come and investigate what was in the bag. Sure enough, he didn't have to wait long before a foolish, rash, young rabbit walked into the trap. The master cat quickly pulled the strings to close the bag, and killed the unfortunate rabbit.

Quite pleased with himself, Puss went with his trophy to the royal palace, where he requested an audience with the King. Eventually he was shown into the royal apartments, where he bowed low and said, 'Your Majesty, my lord the Master of Carabas' (that was the title he had decided to give his master) 'has asked me to bring you this gift of a rabbit.'

'Please thank your lord,' said the king, 'and tell him that I am delighted with his gift.'



Puss kitted out for his adventures: maxicard from Monaco, 1978, part of a set marking Perrault's 350th birth anniversary



Enlargement of the Monaco stamp showing Puss with some of his offerings for the king

On another occasion the cat managed to catch a brace of partridge, by hiding in a cornfield and keeping his bag open. The partridge went into it to feed on the grain he had put in there, and he was able to catch them. The cat presented these also to the king, who was again very pleased and this time gave him a tip.

More gifts for the king

Things continued like this for several weeks, with the cat taking game to the king from time to time, and presenting it as gifts from his master. Then one day the cat decided it was time to move things along; so he waited until he knew the king was going to take a drive with his daughter — the most beautiful of princesses — by the river. To his own master he said, 'I know how you can make a fortune. You just have to follow my advice — which is to go and bathe in the river at a spot I'll show you. I'll take care of the rest.'

So the Marquis of Carabas — although ignorant of the reason — did his cat's bidding and went to bathe where the cat told him to. While he was doing so, the king and princess passed by in their carriage. At this point the cat started to shout, 'Help! Help! My lord the Marquis of Carabas is drowning!' The king looked out of the carriage window and saw that it was the cat calling, the one that had been bringing him tasty game for the past several weeks. He stopped the carriage and ordered his guards to go and assist the man. They pulled him out of the river, while Puss went up to the king and told him that unfortunately his master's clothes had been stolen, in spite of his loud and repeated protestations of 'Thief! Thief!' (Actually Puss had hidden the clothes under a nearby boulder.) Could the king possibly help by supplying some clothes?



Puss flags down the king's coach to ask for help (Equatorial Guinea, 1985)

The king's daughter

Naturally the king ordered his minions to go to fetch clothes — which turned out to be one of his finest suits. The Marquis dressed and went over to the coach, where he was then courteously received by the monarch. Meanwhile, his daughter the princess was surreptitiously casting glances at the cat's now finely dressed master, already a handsome man. As he in turn glanced at her in a respectful but friendly way, she found herself falling for him in a big way. The king asked the Marquis to join them for the rest of their drive.

Very happy to see his plan succeeding, the cat meanwhile ran on ahead of the coach, and came across some peasants mowing a field. He went up to them and said, 'The king will be passing by shortly. I want you to tell him that this meadow you're mowing belongs to the Lord Marquis of Carabas — or I promise things will not go well for you.'

As the king passed by, he did ask to whom the meadow belonged. 'To my Lord Marquis of Carabas,' replied the men, who did not want to test the cat's threat by saying otherwise. 'You can see, your majesty, what a good harvest this field has produced,' said the Marquis, 'and I assure you it is the same every year.'



France, 1987: 'Europa Tales and Legends'



Poland, 1968. from set of children's paintings of fairy tales

The master cat still ran on ahead of the coach, and now met some reapers. To them he repeated his threat and again told them to say to the king, should he ask, that all the grain belonged to the Marquis of Carabas. Again the king was told that was so, and was pleased — as was the Marquis when the monarch congratulated him on his fine harvest. As the journey continued, the cat told everyone he met the same thing — and as a result the king began to be quite surprised by the extent of the Lord Marquis's estates.

The ogre in the castle

At last the cat came to a great castle. It was owned by an extremely rich ogre, probably the richest ever known — and in fact it was the ogre who owned all the lands the king had just passed through and that the cat had claimed belonged to his own master. But the cat had done his homework, and knew who the ogre was and what his powers were. He asked if he could have an audience, saying that to pass by the castle without paying his respects would be quite rude. The ogre received the cat as politely as an ogre was able to, and asked him to take a seat.



Bulgarian label, 2000



Rakish Puss from Manama, 1972

'I have heard,' said the master cat, 'that you have the astonishing ability to change yourself into any creature you choose — such as a lion, an elephant or whatever. Is that indeed so?'

'Of course it is,' answered the ogre, rather pompously. 'I shall now become a lion, so that you may be convinced.'

The cat was absolutely terrified to have a lion so near to him, and leapt up onto the roof — where his boots proved to be no use at all for keeping a grip on the tiles. Fortunately the lion soon resumed his normal form, whereupon Puss came down and said how frightened he had been.

More feline trickery

'I was also told,' said the cat, 'that you can change yourself into the smallest of animals, too, such as a rat or a mouse. But I must say I find that rather hard to believe; surely that is impossible?'

'Impossible?' cried the ogre. Well, I'll soon show you!' — and he changed into a mouse and started to run around. It didn't take long for the cunning cat to catch and eat him.

In the meantime the king had also arrived at the ogre's castle, and decided to investigate it. As he heard the coach's wheels rumbling across the drawbridge, the master cat ran out to greet the king, saying, 'Welcome, your majesty, to the castle of my Lord Carabas.'

'Lord Marquis!' exclaimed the king. Does this fine castle then also belong to you? The court and all these stately buildings around it are splendid! I should like to go inside.'

The king has a feast

Ushering in the king first, the Marquis extended his hand to the princess, who took it and accompanied him into the castle. In a spacious hall they found a great feast laid out, because the ogre had been expecting to entertain his friends. Knowing the king was there, the friends didn't now dare to enter.

His Majesty the King had been charmed by the many excellent qualities of the Marquis of Carabas — not to mention his extensive estates — as had his daughter also. In fact she had quite fallen in love with him. After a few glasses of the very fine wine, the king declared to the Marquis, 'You know, Lord Carabas, it will be only your own fault if you do not become my son-in-law.'

The happy ending

Bowing low several times, the miller's son thanked the king and accepted the honour being bestowed on him. Within a very short time, he and the beautiful princess were married.

The cat became one of Carabas's most important lords — and thereafter ran after mice only when he wanted a little amusement.

Puss in Boots is a favourite subject for the peculiarly British form of stage entertainment known as pantomime, usually performed during or after the Christmas season. The stamp from Jersey (*below right, next page*), the largest of the Channel Islands, comes from a 1995 set devoted to pantomime characters.

To round off this account of the *Puss in Boots* story, the whole tale is colourfully and quite effectively depicted in a set of stamps and labels from Paraguay, dating from 1982 — see below.



Note: Puss in Boots also appears on the inn signs of several English pubs, and you may like to see these in our galleries of 'cat pub signs'. One is in [Gallery 1](#) with a further three pictured in [Gallery 2](#)

Morals of the tale



Label from Mongolia, 1970

It's a big advantage to have a substantial inheritance — but your own diligence and ingenuity are worth more than any money you receive from others.

Or: If a miller's son can so quickly win the heart of a princess, it must be because of his clothes, his looks and his youth. These things do have a part to play in affairs of the heart.



Pantomime stamp from Jersey, 1995

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