

**Cécile Corbel-Morana, *Le Bestiaire d'Aristophane. Collection d'études anciennes. Série grecque, 144.* Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012. Pp. 350. ISBN 9782251326801. €45.70 (pb).**

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Animals are perhaps the most prominent and memorable feature of Old Comedy. Whoever has read Aristophanes' *Frogs* or *Birds* or perhaps attended a performance will be fascinated by the lyrical and fantastic cries such as *brekekekex koax koax* or the *tiotiotix*. Animal choruses as pre-dramatic forerunners of the genre are closely linked with its origins. Corbel-Morana now presents the first modern study dedicated entirely to the dramatic function of animals in Aristophanes. A thorough and rich book, it deserves the attention of those scholars and students who want to understand the phenomenon and workings of the genre.

Corbel-Morana reminds us that Aristophanes does not observe animals out of an intrinsic, biological interest, but rather through symbolic meanings that are culturally mediated by Greek literature, myth, and folklore. Animals, being close to humans, can help to characterize them in all respects. Most importantly, animals serve as metaphors, "realized metaphors" in the words of Jean Taillardat, who also inspires the two-fold structure of the book, i.e. politics (part 1) and poetics (part 2).<sup>1</sup>

Animals have both symbolic and signifying meaning, grounded in imagery and culture, oscillating between positive and negative potential. Surprisingly, Corbel-Morana does not start with the animal choruses but with animals as food, using a taxonomy of war and peace, festival and everyday, utopia, sex and laughter (ch. 1). You are what you eat – therefore Corbel-Morana speaks of the 'politics of the stomach' in *Knights* and *Assembly Women*. Demagogues like Cleon are parasites, the Paphlagonian a fish-eater (ch. 2). Since man is a *zoon politikon* animals serve as perfect instruments in political invective, iambic blaming, and the satire of important citizens (ch. 3). The metaphor can be stretched to a complete *metamorphosis*, with human beings transforming into animals as in *Wasps*. Since most animals live in the wilderness they symbolize uncivilized nature and help define the fluctuating borders between *nomos* and *phusis*. In *Birds* humans change into actual birds, which vacillate between good and bad, sometimes ideal, sometimes cannibalistic, wild creatures (ch. 4).

The second part revolves around ways in which animals connect with poetry and poetics. In a short treatment of the Bakhtinian carnival of style Corbel-Morana explores how Aristophanes incorporates "high" models of Pindar, tragedy, and New Dithyramb into *Peace*. The argument then turns to a philologically thorough investigation of *Frogs* and *Birds*. In the *agon* of *Frogs* between Aeschylus and Euripides, Aristophanes as a comic literary critic uses fantastic hybrids and a realist domestic perspective to highlight tragedy's old and new styles. Corbel-Morana follows this with a rather traditional but complex performative analysis of the frogs' chorus (in which she argues for a visible chorus), the ode of the Hoopoe, and the *parodos* of the *Birds*. A concise conclusion winds up the monograph, followed by a bibliography as well as an index of Aristophanic passages and Greek words.

The book is a fine and far-reaching study that includes many passages and perspectives. It sometimes runs the risk of losing focus and spending too much time on questions that have been repeatedly discussed, like the performance of the frogs' chorus. Yet the philological method, despite all its merits, has certain limits. Although Corbel-Morana touches upon it, some readers might miss a broader anthropological and cultural approach. Anthropologists like Stanley Tambiah speak of animals as "Good to think and good to prohibit," and Dan Sperber as "food for symbolic thought."<sup>2</sup> In her thought-provoking discussion of the role of metaphors and poetics, Corbel-Morana could have taken into consideration the anthropological methods employed by scholars like James Fernandez and Terence Turner, who developed a theory of tropes.<sup>3</sup> According to Fernandez, rituals signify "the acting out of metaphoric predications upon inchoate pronouns which are in need of movement."<sup>4</sup> In their iconic quality, metaphors taken literally can be transformed into action and narrative. Metaphors are movers and shifters; they set something in motion through transfer. In the words of Margaret Alexiou, this

means: “Metaphor shapes ritual (conventional action), just as ritual gives body to metaphor.”<sup>5</sup> Turner shows that through acting out metaphors in performance and through synecdochic framing the actors, as well as the audience, notionally feel like and become e.g. birds. In the play of metaphors in motion, e.g. through dance and discourse, the poetic *metamorphosis* becomes operational. This insight could be a possible theoretical link to understanding the workings of animal plays like *Birds* or *Frogs*.

Furthermore, the anthropological perspective might be complemented with a religious and an overall cultural approach that emphasizes the laws of the comic genre. Old Comedy celebrates the miraculous and bizarre inversion of all norms by lapsing back into fantastic, primordial stages of civilization. The function of the comic genre consists in creating potential views that are complementary to the actual world, from the low and inverted perspective of the ‘Other’, ugly, and obscene, by comically leaping back into atavistic times. The ambivalent comic hero, acting in a fantastic and grotesque comic body-mask, starts a journey into an otherworld that is still comically related to the real world. From this temporal and spatial realm of difference, he draws power and the capacity to heal states of deficiency.<sup>6</sup> Animals, and particularly hybrid monsters, are certainly part of that otherworld, being often linked with death and the underworld. It is in this context that one could perhaps approach the early pre-dramatic animal choruses as well.

Corbel-Morana is hardly aware of the fact that birds and frogs are associated with the realm of death. In this respect, her treatment of *Birds* would have profited from the inclusion of the excellent monograph by Bruno Zannini Quirini,<sup>7</sup> who, like Angelo Brelich, is associated with the Roman school of history of religion. This is especially true in her discussion of the wild perspective of this play (pp. 194-207). Unfortunately, she does not take into consideration the Dionysiac frame of a festival of exception either. Through such a lens we might find a possible explanation for the oscillation between ‘utopian’ and ‘dystopian’ perspectives; the mingling of old and new, of fantasy and reality.

In Old Comedy there is, as is generally known, no such thing as illusion or ‘suspension of disbelief.’ Moreover, in such fantastic experiments, the comic figures can act against the laws of probability and the usual limits of time and space. Old Comedy – as well as its basic god Dionysus – is based on the carnivalesque. Thus the occasion of Dionysiac festivals and the content of many comedies interpenetrate.

It is certainly no coincidence that Corbel-Morana does not cite fundamental research in this respect, e.g. by Aronen, Auffarth, Bierl, Brelich, Des Bouvrie, Hoffman, Lada-Richards, von Möllendorff, Reckford, Riu and Willi.<sup>8</sup> Nor does she take into account scholarship on the rite of passage structure of the *Frogs* or of that comedy’s religious background in association with mysteries.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, she tends to overemphasize the role of the New Dithyramb.

The numerous suggestions should in no way be misunderstood as harsh criticism but as possible directions where scholarship in this specific field could develop in the future. All things considered, this book is a useful reference tool for specialists of Old Comedy. Although it gives a good introduction to various aspects of a rich argument, however, Corbel-Morana’s dissertation, defended in 2002 at the University of Paris X-Nanterre, appears to have assembled different and separate philological studies into a book still lacking, to some extent, a unifying concept and theory. Thus the monograph under review, despite its merits, is certainly not the last word on a rich and rewarding issue.

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## Notes:

1. J. Taillardat, *Les images d’Aristophane. Études de langue et de style*, 2nd ed. Paris 1965.

2. D. Sperber, “Why Are Perfect Animals, Hybrids, and Monsters Food for Symbolic Thought?”, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, 1996, 143-169; S. J. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action. An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge, MA/London 1985, 169-211.

3. J. W. Fernandez (ed.), *Persuasions and Performances. The Play of Tropes in Culture*, Bloomington 1986; id (ed.), *Beyond Metaphor. The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology*, Stanford 1991; T. Turner, “‘We Are Parrots,’ ‘Twins Are Birds’: Play of Tropes as Operational Structure”, in Fernandez 1991, 121-158.

4. Fernandez, *Persuasions* (n. 3, above), 23.

5. M. Alexiou, *After Antiquity. Greek Language, Myth, and Metaphor*, Ithaca/London 2002, 318.

6. A. Bierl, “Experimentelle Innovation und ihre rituell-pragmatischen Grenzen in der Alten Komödie”, *QUCC* n.s. 72.3 (101), 2002, 7-21; “Alt und Neu bei Aristophanes (unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der *Wolken*)”, in: A. von Müller and J. von Ungern-Sternberg (eds.), *Die Wahrnehmung des Neuen in Antike und Renaissance*

(Colloquium Rauricum 8), Munich/Leipzig 2004, 1-24; “‘Schamanismus’ und die Alte Komödie. Generischer Rückgriff auf einen Atavismus und Heilung (mit einer Anwendung am Beispiel von Aristophanes’ *Frieden*)”, in: *Religion. Lehre und Praxis* (Archaiognosia, Suppl. 8), Athens 2009, 13-35.

7. B. Zannini Quirini, *Nephelokokkygia: La prospettiva mitica degli Uccelli di Aristofane*, Rome 1987.

8. J. Aronen, “Notes on Athenian Drama as Ritual Myth-Telling within the Cult of Dionysos”, *Arctos* 26, 1992, 19-37; C. Auffarth, “Der Opferstreik: Ein altorientalisches ‘Motiv’ bei Aristophanes und im homerischen Hymnus”, *Grazer Beiträge* 20, 1994, 59-86; Bierl see n. 6 and A. Bierl, *Ritual and Performativity. The Chorus in Old Comedy*, transl. by A. Hollmann, Cambridge, MA/London 2009 (German orig. 2001); *Dionysos und die griechische Tragödie. Politische und ‘metatheatralische’ Aspekte im Text* (Classica Monacensia 1), Tübingen 1991, 27-44; A. Brelich, “Aristofane: commedia e religione”, in: M. Detienne (ed.), *Il mito. Guida storica e critica*, Rome/Bari 3rd ed. 1982, 103-118; S. Des Bouvrie, “Creative Euphoria. Dionysos and the Theatre”, *Kernos* 6, 1993, 79-112; R. J. Hoffman, “Ritual License and the Cult of Dionysus”, *Athenaeum* n.s. 67, 1989, 91-115; I. Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysus. Ritual and Theatre in Aristophanes’ Frogs*, Oxford 1999; P. von Möllendorff, *Grundlagen einer Ästhetik der Alten Komödie. Untersuchungen zu Aristophanes und Michail Bachtin* (Classica Monacensia 9), Tübingen 1995; id., “Αισχύλον αιοήσομαι – der ‘neue Aischylos’ in den Fröschen des Aristophanes”, *Würzburger Jahrbücher* 21, 1996/97, 129-151; id., *Aristophanes*, Hildesheim 2002; K. J. Reckford, *Aristophanes’ Old-and-New Comedy*, Chapel Hill/London 1987; X. Riu, *Dionysism and Comedy*, Lanham 1999; A. Willi, “Frösche, Sünder, Initianden: Zu einem Aristophanischen Rätsel”, *Museum Helveticum* 65, 2008, 193-211.

9. R. G. Edmonds III, “Who in Hell Is Heracles? Dionysus’ Disastrous Disguise in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*”, in: D. B. Dodd and C. A. Faraone (eds.), *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives. New Critical Perspectives*, London/New York 2003, 181-200; M. Padilla, “The Heracleian Dionysus: Theatrical and Social Renewal in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*”, *Arethusa* 25, 1992, 359-384; Lada-Richards (see n. 8); Willi (see n. 8).