

Book review

Bonafin, Massimo (2021). *Il comico, il sacro, l'osceno: e altri nodi della letteratura medievale*. Eum.

The book entitled *Il comico, il sacro, l'osceno*, written by Massimo Bonafin, offers a collection of thirteen writings on medieval literature from an interdisciplinary perspective. The first half of the book, which includes seven chapters, delineates the wide range of possibilities that such anthropological approach provides. The second half consists of six chapters which specifically analyze the *Roman de Renart* from different perspectives. Each of the thirteen chapters that compose the volume is followed by a useful bibliography, except for the sixth which is followed by a more discursive bibliographic note.

The first chapter analyses a series of episodes coming from the Greek, the Egyptian and the Japanese mythologies which features the gesture of exposing one's vulva pulling up one's clothes in the presence of a divine entity. This action is related to humour according to a schema in which a potential catastrophe is avoided by said action, also referred to as *ἀνάστυμμα*. The global diffusion of the mythologem leads the author to hypothesise a polygenetic origin.

In the second chapter, after a brief summary of formalist positions on the relation between parody and comic devices, with the addition of Freud (1975) and Bergson (1924), the author deals with a theory of humour which integrates both the social and the biological paradigm, with particular reference to Ceccarelli's (1988) considerations on laughter. The schema consists of two situations: in the former, an element is making an unlawful claim, thus sending a threatening message; in the latter, the unlawfulness is made clear and is followed by a submissive message. The sudden shifting leads to a triadic relation in which two poles laugh together at a third one, subverting the previous hierarchical conditions.

The third chapter considers how it is possible to depict the de-mythification of the chivalrous *aventure* only after it had been mythified. In doing so, it takes as a point of departure Bakhtin's (Bachtin 1979a) notions of dialogism and carnivalisation to indicate the negation of the myth and how it is expressed in the *Roman the Renart* (Bonafin 1999; 2012; 2021) and in the *Joufrois de Poitiers* (Manetti 2018) by means of an investigation of the instances of the lexeme *aventure*.

The fourth chapter analyses the hagiographic example of the *Jeu de Sainte Agnès* (De Santis 2016) in the context of a text deeply related to religious elements of worship, emphasising not only the ambivalence of the female nudity, giver of both life and death, but also its visual and spectacular significance, given the richness of scenic instructions present in this theatrical piece.

In the fifth chapter three narrative examples of medieval journeys to the Other World are given coming from the three fundamental social strata and some later variants of the theme. The author explores the application of Einstein's relativity theory to how crossing the spatial border between the two worlds corresponds to a temporal distortion that the character experiences personally.

The sixth chapter examines the often misinterpreted relation between folk culture and high culture, highlighting the limit of the dichotomy between popular and hegemonic, as a

consequence of a synchronic point of view. Hence, the culturally differentiated use of the same material is read in diachronic terms, showing how the disparity dissolves over a longer time.

The seventh chapter studies comparatively the motif of boasting in *Le voyage de Charlemagne* (Bonafin 2007) and in *Digenis Akritas* (Odorico 1995) in terms of Wittgenstein's (2009: 36) family resemblance and its role as an ethno-literary catalyst. After a detailed overview of the instances of the terms deployed to express the act of boasting, a common denominator is found in the systematic lexicalization of *καυχάομαι* and its parallel *gaber*, and it is given a morphology of the motif articulated in twelve traits.

In the eighth chapter, on the other hand, the author exposes the family differences between the many expressions of animalistic literature starting from a comparison of the Aesopian fables and the *Roman de Renart*. The taxonomic reflection on the zoomorphic tale, on account of the respective *Sitz im Leben* (Buss 1978) leads to a clear distinction on the typological dissimilarity between *Fabel*, *Märchen* and *Tiermärchen*. Nonetheless, all these expressions are thought to refer to a common cultural heritage, namely the animalistic folklore.

In the ninth chapter a comparative approach towards the analogies between the characters of Tristan and Renart reveal the concurrence of some traits typical of the trickster; the use of the mask, either of a musician, or the literal modification of skin colour, seems to be a similar narrative material performed in two different modalities correlated by parodic intertextuality.

The tenth chapter focuses on the use of linguistic means as the distinctive aspect of the trickster, whose ability is materialised in the rhetorical device of the prefiguration. The archetypal character creates a verbal world in which a hypothetical risk has already happened, so that the victims lower their guard and expose themselves to the deceiver. The denunciation of a false plot, thus, generates a real and opposite one.

The eleventh chapter focuses on tales having the fox as a main character. The approach is comparative on a large scale which extent excludes the possibility of a direct contact between traditions and, consequently, it takes the biological characteristics of the fox as a point of departure to find a common ground between the occidental and the oriental representations of the animal. The differences in these narratives are nonetheless justified as different expressions traceable to the same primordial characters which they both contain, such as the use of the colours red and white, the lonely hunt by night, or the hostility towards dogs.

The twelfth chapter explores some of the reasons that make the seventh *branche*, meaning one of the tales conventionally numbered that compose the *Roman de Renart* (Bonafin 1999: 6), a relevant episode despite a certain neglect by the critics. The sacrament of confession is here used as a pretext to develop the anticlerical satire between the confessor Hubert and the fox Renart. The observation of the narrative sequences reveals that they are carefully structured and demonstrate an educated use of symbolism and intertextuality.

In the thirteenth chapter, the author analyses the dynamics employed by the unknown Richart de Lison in the twelfth *branche*, which sees the fox Renart and the cat Tibert as the main characters during the Feast of Fools and the resultant caricatural picture involving the animals and the villagers in the church.

After reading this book, one may struggle to find the definite perimeter of its discipline, given the width of examples examined and the even more impressive variety of research tools employed by the author. The same happens with reference to the theme of humour, which may lead to think that only chapters that explicitly mention satire analysis or parodic texts can directly interest the researchers on the field of humour. Nevertheless, I argue that a more profitable key to understand this book is implicitly given in the asyndetic style of its title: *Il comico, il sacro, l'osceno*. The direct juxtaposition of these words effectively echoes the proximity of their relative domains. Along the same lines, this book fruitfully sheds light on how thin the boundaries between these three aspects are in medieval literature, often leading to nuanced

solutions, rather than categorically separated ambits. To clarify this approach, it may be helpful to refer to the author's primary sources.

In order to conduct this operation, Bonafin demonstrates a deep knowledge of the principle of liminality studied by the Glaswegian cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, whose book he edited (Turner 2022), highlighting the structural similarities between the transitional moments in rituals and the medieval cultural phenomena. The shades that characterise the stage of passage in which attributes of the previous and the next phases converge can, therefore, be accosted to the various degrees of shades between the territories of the comic, the sacred and the obscene. Hence, the author reads Turner's (1982: 96) "no longer classified and not yet classified" neither as a void nor as an absence, but as a potentiality in which all combinations are possible, recognising a reason to explore the medieval culture as a *laboratory of liminality*.

This articulation of the matter of study allows the author to analyse the function of humour and the other themes which appear in the texts in a polythetic framework, enabling him to integrate the perspectives necessary to interpret accordingly each theme on its own and in relation to the others. What is particularly worthy of a remark here is that this method acknowledges the coexistence of elements often mistakenly perceived as mutually exclusive, which should also be related to the contribution of anthropology in addressing the difficulty to adopt the perspective of the culture that produced the text, a culture that can be very remote and distant.

When the humorous discourse is analysed in its behavioural facet, the main point of reference is Fabio Ceccarelli's (1998) biosocial interpretation of the smile and the laugh. The author makes an extensive use of what Ceccarelli represents with the expression Pi (Md/Mm) → Ms, which is the response to a certain stimulus R¹, in which laugh is caused by the abrupt transition from a message of threat to a message of submission (Ceccarelli 1988: 138).

When it comes to humour in the form of parody and satire, the variety of influences increases, as the numerous references to critics and philologists show. Nonetheless, Bakhtin remains one of the most prominent sources, and his refuse of rigid systematicity, and the consequently wide range of applicability of his study, has presumably played an important role in this choice. Indeed, the author has elsewhere showcased consistent and heuristically relevant analogies between the results obtained by Turner (1972; 1986; 1993; 2014) and Bakhtin (Bachtin 1963; 1965), although they were operating on distant fields (Bonafin 2019: 77). What the author has explicitly emphasised is the similitude between the already cited liminality and Bakhtin's carnival. The combination of these epistemological instruments is thus a helpful insight into Bonafin's flexible attitude towards humour.

In this book a step forward is taken in the direction of a more complete net of disciplines apt to observe humour on account of a remarkable affinity with Ceccarelli's (1998) conclusions on laughter as an essential tool of social cohesion due to its anti-aggressive and anti-hierarchical function, pursuing the active practice of a line of research that the author had already started, involving also semiotics and culturology (Bonafin 2001).

Apart from philology and anthropology, interdisciplinarity remains a keyword to this book, which approach several other branches of knowledge. Nevertheless, the presence of disciplines outside the author's area of expertise does not compromise the scientific rigour of the work, which is, on the contrary, enhanced by the active cooperation with experts on said fields. An explicit example is the fifth chapter, which features a note from the physician Ettore Majorana (p. 105), less explicit is the wide use of authoritative studies coming from a variety of branches,

¹ The Italian initials stand for "pretesa illegittima", "messaggio di dominanza", "messaggio di minaccia", "messaggio di sottomissione" and "stimolo al riso". Respectively, unlawful claim, message of dominance, message of threat, message of submission and stimulus for laugh.

such as Ginzburg's or Needham's. Therefore, the privileged position of a romance philologist bonds well with a broad perspective. Indeed, this anthropological approach enriches as many fields as it embraces, for they are observed in light of the same spectrum, rather than as incommunicable sections.

In conclusion, I believe that Bonafin's book could be of interest for a further understanding of humour for two major reasons: firstly, with regard to the matter of study, his accurate analysis of parodic and satiric literature is a valuable source for those wishing to approach the specificity of humour in medieval texts; secondly, the multiple perspectives that he adopts to study a text offer not only an interdisciplinary outlook, but also the means for an analysis of humour in relation to different anthropological and literary issues, such as sexuality and religion. Hence, the methodological reflection underlying Bonafin's study discloses a wide range of possibilities for the study of humorous discourse at different levels. Considering the characteristics described above, I strongly recommend Bonafin's *Il comico, il sacro, l'osceno* as a valid collection of readings which raise several questions, many of which still need to be answered.

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