

# Comptes rendus

ANNA ANGELINI, *Dal Leviatano al Drago. Mostri marini e zoologia antica fra Grecia e Levante*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018, 268 p., ISBN 978-88-15-27814-2.

This monograph is part of a tradition of studies on the cultural representations of animality, which has produced important results in the recent past<sup>1</sup>. Along the lines of the work of scholars such as Igor Baglioni and the undersigned author of this review, Anna Angelini (henceforth: the A.) challenges the « experience-far » category of « monstrosity » by showing how inadequate it is to understand and frame the beliefs of the Hebraic and Greco-Roman cultures in an « emic » perspective<sup>2</sup>. More specifically, the volume investigates the complex epidemiological chain that leads, in a bumpy and non-linear way, from the representations of the Leviathan of Hebraic culture to the Middle Ages' dragon, passing through the reconfigurations that took place in the Greek and Latin translations of the biblical texts.

The volume is divided into four long chapters.

Chapter 1 (*Variazioni sul Leviatano*, pp. 21 ff.) is mainly dedicated to the multifarious and polyphonic appearances of the beast in the Old Testament: primordial polycephalic creature of the marine abysses (Psalm 74,13-14), meal to unspecified desert beings (the *yiyyim*: Isaiah 27,1), serpent-like creature evoked by expert sorcerers (Job 3,6-9), the Leviathan is always featured with both hyperbolic and elusive traits.

In this connection, the A. is not interested in identifying a possible real referent of the « monster »; rather, she investigates the symbolic and narrative functions that are assigned to it. *Inter alia*, she shows that it is also the relationship with the Leviathan that allows the God of the Jews to be culturally constructed not only « come creatore del cosmo (Job 38,1-38), ma anche come controllore e garante dei suoi spazi liminali (38, 39-39, 30) [...]». Non si tratta, comunque, di una sovranità edenica e definitivamente pacificata, ma del dominio su un mondo in continua ribellione, i cui tratti inquietanti non possono essere definitivamente eliminati » (p. 45 f.).

Particularly interesting is the second section of the chapter, focused on the apocryphal sources and the rabbinic interpretations that describe the Leviathan either as one of the poles of the world (opposite to the other pole, represented by the Behemoth) or a gigantic fish whose flesh will be offered to the righteous at the judgment day banquet (see pp. 64-79 for the occurrences).

Chapter 2 (*Di alcuni mostri di confine*, pp. 81 ff.) deals with the Greek and Latin translations of the Bible and the ancient commentaries dedicated to it. More specifically, the A. analyzes the cultural dynamics that have influenced the linguistic choices made by the trans-

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., MAURIZIO BETTINI, *Nascere. Storie di donne, donnole, madri ed eroi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1998; CRISTIANA FRANCO, *Senza ritegno. Il cane e la donna nell'immaginario della Grecia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003 (now translated into English with new reflections on theory and method in the final Appendix: *Shameless. The Canine and the Feminine in Ancient Greece*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., IGOR BAGLIONI, « Note alla terminologia e al concetto di "mostruoso" nell'antica Grecia », in Id. a cura di, *Monstra. Costruzione e percezione delle identità ibride e mostruose nel Mediterraneo antico*, vol. 2, Roma, Quasar, 2013, pp. 15-32; PIETRO LI CAUSI, *Sulle tracce del mantichora. La zoologia dei confini del mondo in Grecia e a Roma*, Palermo, Palumbo, 2003; Id., « Mostri propriamente detti e creature *paradoxa*. Un tentativo di classificazione », in IGOR BAGLIONI a cura di, *Monstra*, pp. 53-67.

lators of the *Septuagint* as well as Hieronimus in rendering the original Hebraic text, without neglecting the role played by the *Physiologus* and the patristic tradition as « cultural filter ».

To understand the dynamics, which led to the transmission of the Hebraic teratological tradition from one cultural frame to another, a key text is the Book of Job, filled with references to several beings whose names must have been obscure even to its contemporary readers. In this connection, the A. shows how the first Greek translation of this text, made in Alexandria in the middle of the II<sup>d</sup> century BCE works as a sample of « creative exegesis » as far as the Hellenistic scholars, confronted with Hebraic zoonyms whose real referents were opaque and incomprehensible, end up resorting to Greek zoonyms fished among the most elusive and exotic of their own naturalistic tradition: the *lîs* (probably a big feline) becomes the *myrmicoleon*, the *ya'el* (maybe a mountain goat) becomes the *tragelaphos*, and the *Lywyatan* becomes either a generic *drakôn* or a *kêtos* in Greek, or even a *cetus*, or a *pistrix* in Latin (with the exception of Aquila and Symmachus, who recommend to transliterate the original term as *Leviathan*: see p. 105 for references).

In this respect, the loss of the proper name implies that the biblical monster is now confused with other *tannînîm*, *i.e.* with other hard-to-classify serpentiform marine creatures of the Hebraic tradition. This phenomenon has a twofold effect: on the one hand, both a « de-mythologization » and a « naturalization » of the beast is realized. On the other hand, the Leviathan ends up being « demonized », thus turning into a generic symbol of evil, which has lost many other « fantastic » and evocative features.

As for the metamorphosis of the Hebraic sea monsters either in *kêtê* or in *pistrices*, Chapter 3 (*Metamorfosi del pesce di Giona e altre creature mitiche*, pp. 115 ff.) is undoubtedly worth a close reading. In this section, the A. focuses on the cultural dynamics that come into play when the famous story of Jonah's journey into the belly of the whale is translated

into Greek and Latin. More specifically, the zoonyms used in the Greco-Roman tradition make Jonah's whale lose many of its prior symbolic features. Whereas the Hebraic tale can be read as a story of death and rebirth as well as an epic of acquisition of knowledge, in the Hellenistic version the biblical creature has simply become a generic *kêtos*, *i.e.* an animal which is culturally framed either as a shapeless or a polymorphic aquatic creature that swallows up humans and brings death and destruction.

Chapter 4 (*Sulle tracce del drago*, pp. 165 ff.) deals with the natural and cultural lore of the *drakontes/dracones*. In this respect, the A. shows how the medieval *draco* becomes a sort of exception within the Christian tradition of the Bestiary: contrary to what happens to other animals, it always represents evil, for it is « uno dei casi (non per nulla assieme al *cetus*!) che si sottrae alla regola dell'ambivalenza simbolica su cui si costruisce il bestiario patristico, secondo la quale ogni animale è espressione di *oppositae qualitates*. Un principio cardine dell'esegesi cristiana, è, infatti, che nell'interpretazione allegorica l'animale possa significare, a seconda del contesto, una qualità morale, ma anche il suo contrario. Al drago invece, in quanto figura del diavolo, tocca farsi carico di tutti gli aspetti riprovevoli e ripugnanti dell'umanità » (p. 168).

More specifically, the A. shows how the *draco* loses the elusive contours it had had in the natural history and the literature of the Greeks and the Romans, and gradually becomes that monstrous fire-breathing flying reptile whose behaviour is associated, in the Medieval imagination, with the worst human sins.

In conclusion, the monograph, which ends with a list of bibliographical references (pp. 221 ff.) and with a useful index of the cited *loci* (pp. 261 ff.), is a brilliant investigation into the mechanisms of cross-cultural exchanges and the epidemiology of representations and beliefs of the ancients. Useful for scholars in both Greco-Roman and Hebraic culture, this essay will provide excellent insights even for

anthropologists and for scholars in cognitive studies who work on folk taxonomies.

In this respect, the book by Anna Angelini has only one flaw, which consists of the numerous typos that escaped the last revision of

the drafts. However, it is a forgivable defect in a work that is well documented and optimally set on the theoretical side.

PIETRO LI CAUSI

---

MICHAEL D. BARBEZAT, *Burning Bodies. Communities, Eschatology, and the Punishment of Heresy in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2018, 271 p., ISBN 978-1-5017-1680-5.

---

L'ouvrage de M. Barbezat s'aventure sur un terrain particulièrement labouré ces dernières décennies, et objet de nombreux débats, celui de la persécution des hérésies entre le XI<sup>e</sup> et le XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Disons-le d'emblée, il ne faut pas s'attendre à y découvrir de nouveaux dossiers. L'ambition du livre est ailleurs. L'auteur, reprenant des affaires déjà toutes bien identifiées des chercheurs, se concentre surtout sur les comptes rendus des exécutions par le feu de certains de ces hérétiques et cherche à dégager les significations théologiques et anthropologiques que ces exécutions revêtaient pour les médiévaux.

Comme annoncé dès l'introduction, sa démarche s'inscrit avant tout dans une « histoire des idées » et il cherche à montrer comment les personnes bien réelles qui meurent comme hérétiques « sont transformées en instruments de discours qui justifient leur exécution » (p. 3). Cette introduction propose un rapide – mais précis – tour de l'historiographie des hérésies médiévales et en fait ressortir les lignes de fractures, entre ceux qui pensent que l'existence d'hérésies structurées était alors une réalité historique et ceux qui, au contraire, considèrent qu'elles sont avant tout des « inventions intellectuelles » (p. 4) forgées par les élites cléricales cultivées. L'auteur, tout en essayant de ménager régulièrement les deux approches, semble plutôt se situer dans cette seconde mouvance, et convoque d'ailleurs à plusieurs reprises les travaux fondateurs de Robert I. Moore et de certains de ses « héritiers » (tels Mark Pegg ou Uwe Brunn). L'intro-

duction rappelle enfin que dans l'économie générale des peines prononcées contre les hérétiques au cours du Moyen Âge, le bûcher resta relativement rare.

Avant d'en venir à l'examen de ces récits d'exécution, l'auteur propose dans les deux premiers chapitres une ample réflexion sur la place du feu dans l'imaginaire chrétien. Le premier chapitre (« Our God Is Like a Consuming Fire ») examine la place du feu chez les auteurs chrétiens depuis Grégoire le Grand et l'idée que ces auteurs se faisaient de la notion de communauté (une des notions clés, qui apparaît dès le sous-titre de l'ouvrage), dont l'une des images centrales était le corps en feu. Il élabore ainsi une sorte de typologie ou de distinction entre trois types de feu : un feu unifiant et symbole de l'amour de Dieu, tel qu'il est notamment considéré par les théologiens et Pères de l'Église (Jérôme, Ambroise...); un feu symbole de division, celui de l'Enfer; enfin le feu du Purgatoire, qui est en quelque sorte un mélange des deux premiers. Ces réflexions sont prolongées dans le chapitre 2, dense et convaincant (« Fields and Bodies. Toleration and Threat in a Shared Space »), qui revient sur les discussions théoriques, depuis l'Antiquité, autour de la nécessité ou non d'exécuter les hérétiques. Il y insiste en particulier sur deux conceptions qui ont très largement été reprises et commentées tout au long du Moyen Âge : une première conception qui vient du domaine agricole et qui, s'appuyant sur la parabole du bon grain et de l'ivraie (Mt 13,36-43), souvent considérée comme un appel à la patience et à