

Kirja-arvosteluja – Book reviews

Bernhardt-House, Phillip A.: *Werewolves, Magical Hounds, and Dog-headed Men in Celtic Literature. A Typological Study of Shape-Shifting*. Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010. 498 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-7734-3714-2. Price: £104.95, \$159.95.

In this study, Phillip Bernhardt-House has taken on a formidable task: to explore the significance of canid imagery in Celtic literatures by cataloguing every canid-related theme and motif in this material ‘as currently known’ (p. 12). The term ‘canid’ is defined by the author in the widest possible sense, to encompass ‘both the specific class of hounds, but also wild and domestic dogs of all types, as well as the wider classification that would include lupines/wolves and lupines/foxes’ (p. 12). The discussion also covers the various manifestations of therioanthropy (human-to-animal transformations, such as werewolves), and provides an extended examination of the monstrous figures known as *cynocephali* or ‘dog-heads’. To suit the breadth of the topic, the body of source material consulted is equally vast, ranging from archaeology and iconography to early legal sources, medieval narratives and later folklore. The result is an exhaustive and wide-ranging inventory of real, heroic, and bizarre creatures; a book which, to quo-

te the Foreword by John Carey, truly testifies to its author’s ‘uncommon diligence and dedication’, as well as his ‘flair for the sustained pursuit of the elusive detail’ (p. vii).

The book is divided into six chapters, including the Introduction (pp. 116), which outlines the current state of research and the methodology used, and the Conclusion (pp. 327–336). Chapters Two to Five form the main body of the study, providing a detailed typology of the different kinds of Celtic canines encountered in the sources. The work also includes five appendices, with surveys of 1) personal names, 2) archaeological, Classical and iconographical material, 3) legal texts, and 4) the hounds of the Fianna, as well as 5) and edition and provisional translation of the poem *Conceand ingi Cathbaidh caim*. The impressive index is useful when trying to find specific information within the book, especially since the sheer range of examples treated in each chapter could otherwise prove overwhelming.

The most important theoretical idea employed in the study is that of liminality. The concept originates in Arnold van Gennep’s work on the rites of passage (first published in French in 1909), but it was only in the late 1960s that Victor Turner first developed and defined it as it is generally known today, that is, as a structurally ambivalent

'betwixt and between' state pertaining to individuals and entities that are variously characterised by anomaly, ambiguity and marginality. It is somewhat curious that while Bernhardt-House's understanding of liminality seems to be clearly predicated upon this Turnerian conception of the liminal, there is no reference to Turner's work in the book. Considering the important ways in which Turner expanded and elaborated on van Gennepp's original work, however, some acknowledgment and further discussion would have been welcome.

According to Bernhardt-House, dogs are by nature marginal creatures because they exist 'in a liminally-balanced state between human culture and wild nature': they inhabit and guard borders, communicate in a manner that seems like language, and are often treated like family members (p. 15). Marked by the same interstructural situation are also the wolves (closer to nature but nevertheless equally liminal as their domesticated counterparts), and, of course, the marvellous canid therioanthropies. Although the implications of the proposed liminal character of some of the figures are not always fully explored in the actual analysis, it is nevertheless evident that the concept holds great potential for further exploration of the role and function of canid-like figures, as well as the multifaceted symbolism associated with them.

The ordinary, renowned, and monstrous canids examined in Chapter Two represent, by the author's own admission, a group that is 'selective rather than exhaustive' (p. 17). Even so, the survey presented

in this chapter alone covers over eighty texts, featuring more than a hundred individual canids. The discussion proceeds by enumerating ordinary canids which either have a central role in a given tale, or otherwise merit naming and remembering in the narrative tradition. A treatment of various supernatural canids then follows, ranging from the well-known example of the hound of Culann to the singular instance of an otherworldly magical fox in a late folktale related to Finn mac Cumail. In general terms, Bernhardt-House notes that a considerable number of the so-called ordinary hounds appear to be introduced in the narratives only to die soon afterwards. Working from this observation, he suggests that the idea that dogs stand for death—either as surrogates for human characters [...] or simply in the way that they seem to be intrinsically bound up with ideas of death, the underworld/otherworld and the afterlife' (p. 107) seems to hold true with regard to the Celtic material. Accordingly, he proposes that the view of the liminality and ambivalence of otherworldly canid figures, previously put forth by Kim McCone, could be broadened to include non-supernatural hounds as well, although this should not be taken to imply that all dog figures are merely manifestations of the same mythic prototype.

In Chapter Three, Bernhardt-House offers an analysis of the motif of serial shapeshifting, with particular focus on cases where one of the forms assumed is that of a dog or a wolf. Alongside the notable cases of Taliesin, Mongán mac Fiachna, and the Morrigan, the discussion also includes a number of examples from

later folklore, which illustrate the motif's widespread occurrence as an international story pattern. With regard to the earlier material, he considers the possibility that the motif might reflect a Celtic or even Indo-European belief in reincarnation, or perhaps more fittingly, 'a belief in or perception of a continuity within the material world of some sort of life-force or animating spirit, present in humans as well as natural or elemental powers' (p. 121). The fact that so many of the examples from Insular Celtic literatures include a canid shape is, according to the author, noteworthy in itself, and could be taken to indicate that the significance of the motif is not solely tied to its entertainment value.

Some of the issues raised in relation to the motif of shapeshifting are explored in more detail in Chapter Four, which charts the Celtic evidence for lycanthropy (human-to-wolf), cynanthropy (human-to-dog), and other kinds of canid-related transformations such as alopanthropy (human-to-fox). The comparative perspective adopted in this section is considerably broader than that of the preceding chapters: starting from the Epic of Gilgamesh, the author traces the theme in its various guises by taking examples from the Classical material, the Norse sagas and the writings of the early Christian fathers. In the analysis of the Celtic material, he employs a fivefold division of heuristic categories, including the metaphorical use of the werewolf image (such as the expression *oc faelad*, 'going a-wolfing' used of *diberg* activities, and the various personal names meaning 'werewolf'); the so-called constitutional

werewolves, to whom the lycanthropic condition is natural; the elements of the folktale type known as 'The Werewolf's Tale'; transformations caused by magic; and the 'threatened werewolf' stories, in which some lycanthropic associations are present, although the actual werewolf is not.

One of the conclusions drawn from this vast corpus of werewolf material is that in many of the tales dated to the later Middle Ages, the werewolf is portrayed as a sympathetic and benevolent figure that retains human sense despite its bestial form. Bernhardt-House notes that such a positive representation of the character only gained predominance in Celtic literature after the twelfth century, whereas the earlier evidence appears to emphasise different, perhaps ritual or otherworldly aspects of the phenomenon. Another interesting suggestion made in this context is that many aspects of the core plot of the 'Werewolf's Tale' -type could derive from a specifically Arthurian werewolf tradition, and thus testify to the popularity of this material in Ireland already prior to the attestations of the more conventional versions of the tale in later folklore.

Chapter Five examines yet another important aspect of canid symbolism, namely the motif of cynocephalic or dog-headed beings. These include the monstrous races treated in ancient and medieval traditions, the onomastic evidence for personal names and place names meaning 'Doghead', as well as references to cases where either the heads of dogs or canine features on the head bear particular

significance. In the early Irish material, the *cynocephali* are often depicted as a host of threatening invaders, as is the case in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* and in a number of tales related to Finn and the fianna. The pervasive association between canines and martial fierceness may also be relevant with regard to the attraction of the name ‘Doghead’, although linguistic evidence would seem to indicate that the onomastic element predates the external influence of cynocephalic lore. As Bernhardt-House concludes, the *cynocephali* encountered in the Celtic sources can perhaps best be seen as representing a creative synthesis of a process ‘by which pre-existing elements in Celtic culture were adapted and extended when they encountered external analogous concepts’; thus while the motif of dog-headed races may not be of native origin, ‘the enthusiasm with which it was incorporated into texts of many different types and intents suggests it had an appeal or an importance which we might do well do reconsider’ (pp. 324–325).

On a whole, the work appears to assume that readers have some familiarity with the wealth of source materials examined, even though the author’s highly intelligible prose would make the book accessible to non-specialists alike. Perhaps owing in part to the work’s purpose of serving as a typological motif-index, the author often refers to specific sources without providing further contextual information as to their background or dating. Thus from the beginning, the reader encounters references such as ‘the ritual of *imbas forosnai* as described in *Sanas Cormaic*’ (p. 23), ‘the law-tract on distraint’ (p. 25),

or ‘a lament similar to those of *Suibhne*’ (p. 37). While all of these particular texts are well-known to most Celticists, the remarkable confidence with which the author draws parallels between the Celtic material and the Greek, Norse, Indian, and Egyptian evidence entails that very few, if indeed any, of his readers can claim equal expertise in all of these areas. A general note on source criticism would have therefore been desirable, if only to clarify the nature of the materials consulted, and the basic principles of the comparative method used.

Considering the broadness of the topic, it is evident that the author cannot hope to cover every aspect of it within the confines of a single monograph. Possible avenues for future research are suggested in the Conclusion, including questions that the author himself will explore further in his forthcoming publications. Even as it stands, however, Bernhardt-House’s study is a veritable treasure-trove for scholars working on any aspect of animal symbolism in different cultural contexts. It is hoped that the wider scholarly community across disciplinary boundaries will discover this book, and that Celticists, too, will be inspired to take up some of the issues raised in the study. While the last word on the subject of Celtic canids may not have been said yet, Bernhardt-House has certainly taken a head start in the present work towards that goal.

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