

THE CULTURAL NON-HUMAN ANIMAL ANALYSING ITALO CALVINO'S ITALIAN FAIRY TALES WITH ZOOSEMIOTICS

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ABSTRACT. *The Cultural Non-human Animal. Analysing Italo Calvino's Italian Fairy Tales with Zoosemiotics.* This article analyses traditional Italian fairy tales retold by Italo Calvino in 1956 and their relationships to nature and culture. Zoosemiotics, a branch of both semiotics and animal studies, argues that nature and culture are not separated and in contrast and that, instead, culture is a limited part of nature. This conceptual change envisions different relationships between humans and animals as well as more broadly the end of animal anthropomorphism. Methodologically, the article applies a zoosemiotic analysis to the Italian fairy tales retold by Calvino. The article concludes that some animals in the fairy tales are still anchored to the old view while others move towards the cultural terrain, showing cultural attitudes and inhabiting a cultural area usually reserved for human animals. This shift leads to an inverted semiotic destiny of humans and animals in fairy tales: while animals are traditionally represented as symbols, Calvino's rewriting turns them into icons, representing only themselves, marked by a neat individuality and independence from their species; while humans are, conversely, usually represented as icons, Calvino's stories turn them into symbols, such as ingratitude or jealousy. The article shows the usefulness of zoosemiotics and

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nature/culture in analysing non human-animals in fairy tales and adds to earlier studies considering non-human animals in Calvino's fairy tales as an epitome of Anthropocene.

Keywords: *animal studies, fairy tales, Italo Calvino, zoosemiotics, nature and culture, anthropomorphism, Puss in Boots*

REZUMAT. *Animalul cultural non-uman. O analiză a poveștilor lui Italo Calvino cu ajutorul zoosemioticii.* Articolul de față analizează povești italiene tradiționale repovestite de către Italo Calvino în 1956, precum și relația lor cu natura și cultura. Zoosemiotica, o ramură atât a semioticii cât și a studiilor despre animale, argumentează că natura și cultura nu sunt separate și nu se află în contrast, ci că, dimpotrivă, cultura este o parte limitată a naturii. Această schimbare conceptuală preconizează relații diferite între oameni și animale, precum și, în sens mai general, sfârșitul antropomorfismului animalelor. Metodologic, articolul aplică o analiză zoosemiotică poveștilor italiene repovestite de Calvino. Articolul conchide că anumite povești cu animale sunt încă ancorate într-o viziune mai veche, în timp ce altele se deplasează către un teren cultural, demonstrând atitudini culturale și populând aria culturală rezervată de obicei animalelor umane. Această schimbare conduce la un destin semiotic inversat al oamenilor și animalelor în povești: în vreme ce animalele sunt în mod tradițional reprezentate ca simboluri, rescrierea lui Calvino le transformă în icon-uri, ele reprezentându-se doar pe sine, marcate de o individualitate și de o independență distincte față de specia lor, în timp ce oamenii, de obicei reprezentați ca icon-uri, sunt transformați în povestirile lui Calvino în simboluri, de pildă ale ingratitudinii ori geloziei. Articolul arată utilitatea zoosemioticii și binomului natură/cultură în analiza animalelor non-umane în povești, și aduce contribuții la studiile anterioare despre animalele non-umane în poveștile lui Calvino ca întruchipare a Antropocenului.

Cuvinte-cheie: *studii despre animale, povești, Italo Calvino, zoosemiotică, natură și cultură, antropomorfism, Motanul încălțat*

Introduction

This article analyses non-human animals' representations in the traditional Italian folktales rewritten by Italo Calvino in 1956. It focuses on non-human animals' roles within these folktales, and on the ways these non-human animals communicate among themselves and interact with humans. Fairy tales have very often presented animals among their main characters, sometimes in more symbolic ways, other times stereotypically, often as anthropomorphic creatures

with the same human characteristics and abilities, other times as detached from humans and constituting a specific animal realm. At the heart of this variety of roles, there are always issues related to the concepts of “nature” and “culture”, the categories that have for long helped humans define themselves in relation to the non-human. What is interesting is that the borders of and the relationships between these categories have often been redesigned, as have the meanings stemming from them. This article takes this into account to determine which version Calvino is more concerned with.

Even in the case of Calvino's fairy tales, however, these two categories have proven to be useful in understanding the role that non-human animals play and, more broadly, the idea of the relationships between the human and the non-human implied by the Italian writer. Thus, the aim of this article is to find out how in Calvino's Fairy tales non-human animals take position in relation to the concepts of nature and culture.

To pursue this aim, this work also draws on other studies on non-human animals in Calvino, such as Wheeler (2014), a Marca (2020) and Iovino (2021). In doing so, it also adds new perspectives going beyond those offered by these studies, as is evident in the conclusive section of this work.

Italo Calvino's retold fairy tales

In 1956, Italo Calvino published *Fiabe Italiane* (Calvino 1956), later translated into English and published as *Italian Folktales* (Calvino 1980), composed of 200 fairy tales coming from all the twenty Italian regions plus Corsica (Haase 2008). In the first pages of the book, Calvino explains what fairy tales are for him: “Folktales are real. Taken all together, they offer, in their oft-repeated and constantly varying examinations of human vicissitudes, a general explanation of life preserved in the slow ripening of rustic consciences” (1980, xiii).

Later, Calvino (1980) specifies how he collected and organised these stories. They had already been published, mostly came from the nineteenth century and he rewrote them trying to save their traditional structures and stylistically homogenise them. They are thus neither original nor to be considered as entirely composed by Calvino. He also reflects on the difficulties posed by retracing the real origin of a tale. Fairy tales, in fact, always travel and produce many versions of themselves, generating a continuous retelling. In the fairy tale *The parrot*, for example, saving a girl through storytelling reflects the importance of telling stories for Calvino (this tale is among those I analyse below). In one of his late books, *Lezioni Americane* (Six Memos for the Next Millennium, 1988), Calvino would come back to *Fiabe Italiane*, pointing out that his interest in fairy tales was not related to folklore, but to the style, structure, rhythm, and logic that fairy tales are based on.

Calvino's work drew the attention of other writers. The science-fiction novelist Ursula K. Le Guin (2013), reviewing the American edition of the book, writes that she was positively surprised by how the book combines the familiar and the unexpected and defines it as the Italian counterpart of the German collection by the Grimms, as Calvino himself wrote in the introduction. Scambray (2000) asserts instead that Calvino's work is different from the Grimms' or Andersen's renditions of fairy tales. While the tales by these authors were well structured and cleaned to be read by the youngsters, in Calvino's collection we can find the unpredictability, disorder and hostility of real life. Le Guin's (2013) interest is, however, stylistic. She extolls Calvino's touch in rewriting these stories, his clarity and originality. The result is "one of the best storytellers alive telling us some of the best stories in the world – what luck!" (Le Guin 2013). Similarly, "the introduction contains some of the finest things said on folklore since Tolkien" (Le Guin 2013).

Anthony Burgess (1981) notices instead that reading Calvino's rewritten fairy tales suggests that animals and the rest of nature form an inseparable unity. Specifically on the role of animals in Calvino's tales, Nannicini (2008) finds that they very often play decisive narrative roles by helping humans to solve serious problems. This also happens when animals give humans the power of transforming into animals. When they become animals, humans can do things they cannot do earlier, and very often this transformation improves their lives. It is thus clear that in these tales the states of being human animals and non-human animals are two conditions that frequently merge (Nannicini 2008).

Zoosemiotics and its new perspective on nature and culture

In the 1960s and 1970s, many scholars put forward the idea that considering the two categories of nature and culture as separate and even fighting each other would be disputable. This was not a completely new perspective. Renaissance (and medical) humanism, and natural philosophy had already analysed the life on Earth as a coherent whole (Hirai 2011), however, the Enlightenment had since the eighteenth century established that humans were in contrast with nature and this remained the dominant view at least until the beginning of the twentieth century (Murphy 1992). Anthropocentrism was, however, criticised and this trend gradually grew by asking more space for animals and non-human life in general (Howell 2021).

Within this context, Thomas Sebeok (1968 and 1972) founded zoosemiotics, a branch of semiotics that considers animals as individuals and never in terms of the mere function they may have for humans. Zoosemiotics also investigates human representations of animals in literature, film, and other

media. For Maran et al (2011, 1) zoosemiotics is “the study of signification, communication and representation within and across animal species.”

One of the most relevant issues raised by Sebeok (1994) concerns the relationships between nature and culture. If we assume that non-human animals produce meaning and communicate in their own specific ways, as the above-mentioned definition (Maran et al 2011, 1) asserts, it is truly difficult to ascribe to them a secondary role in comparison to human animals. Yet, traditional views still consider humans as completely belonging to the side of culture and non-human animals entirely to the side of nature. That is why Sebeok opposes this view and argues that nature and culture cannot be in contrast, as one is an integral part of the other. More specifically, culture is a limited part of the field of nature.

Following on from this, other semioticians have developed the relationships between nature and culture as reciprocal and in a continuous state of flux. Specifically, semiotics applied to animals “focuses on the engagement of culture and nature through signs” (Siewers 2014, 5) and sees nature and culture as two elements that continuously enrich each other. The novelty here is considering even animals as able to produce cultural artefacts, as for example animals’ nests. We usually consider the very ingenious anthill built by ants as a natural product, while the equally brilliant skyscrapers made by humans we see as products of culture. However, if we accept the theories referenced above, we understand that this implicit hierarchy should be redesigned. Anthill and skyscrapers are actually two products made by animals (human or non-human) and thus both belong to the field of culture. Thus, zoosemiotics considers that “culture can be visualised as being produced by nature” (Caudhary 2012, 114).

Martinelli (2010) finds that we cannot accept “the untouchable dualism nature–culture” (Martinelli 2010, 35). In fact, for him “it is when we divide the world in two that we are being superficial” (Martinelli 2010, 58). Thus, “it is unacceptable to treat them separately because too many and too complex are the relations between the two. We cannot analyse any cultural phenomenon as completely untied from natural context” (Martinelli 2010, 58).

This has led to Sebeok’s (1968; 1972; 1994) call for semiotics as a theory of investigation regarding the entire biosphere, not only the limited human field. Barbieri adds that semiotics, after animals, “gradually extended to other living creatures. Eventually, the discovery of the genetic code suggested that the cell itself has a semiotic structure” (2008, xi). This generated biosemiotics, “the idea that all living creatures are semiotic systems” (Barbieri 2008, xi).

Mandoki (2013) points out that only our ignorance of what concerns non-human animals could provoke such a serious gap in human knowledge. The new perspective ultimately implies different relationships between humans

and animals, the end of animal anthropomorphism, and majorly increased respect for non-human animals.

All of this may also be seen as something with the potential to enlarge the field of social sciences. Mäekivi (2012) theorises that even animals can be objects of social science research. More specifically, they have social roles as they interact in always differing ways, and thus they should also be investigated through the social roles that they play, acquiring cultural characteristics. This study investigates whether this happens in Calvino's fairy tales, seeking to answer the following question: in the fairy tales rewritten by Italo Calvino, how do non-human animals take position in relation to the concepts of nature and culture? The next section develops the methodology to answer this question.

Methodology

As biosemiotics and zoosemiotics have become two relevant theories useful for developing better understanding of life within the human-animal universe and its relationships with humans, some semioticians have tried to design research methods specially for this setting. More broadly, this has taken some semiotic principles to the study of any living being. Wheeler (2014) argues that semiotics has a role in theoretical biology, as natural life functions like any system of sign. Thus, if we consider the importance of interpretation, which produces various meanings in human language, we must do the same if we analyse a cell or DNA, as does for, instance, Shapiro (2012). They too may produce many meanings, while we often see them as more predictable. This view has also produced a critical account of materialism in science, as pointed out by Nagel (2012).

Starting from this similarity between the human and the non-human universe, Maran et al (2016) point out that zoosemiotic analysis should be a qualitative research method considering non-human animals similar to human ones, and thus individual beings producing meaning and participating in the systems of signs to be decoded, which is the fundamental aim of semiotics in general. Moreover, because of the many types of research implied by a general concept like zoosemiotics, they imagine this method as plural, composed of a series of options that can be chosen by the researcher according to the specific needs of each investigation.

More precisely, they list four kinds of zoosemiotic analysis: the first one is *umwelt* analysis, that is, the investigation of how the animals perceive the environment where they live, act and communicate; the second one concerns the analysis of the ways non-human animals communicate with other non-human or with human animals; the third one regards the production of meaning produced by the animal when using and moving through the space surrounding

her or him; finally, the fourth one consists of looking at animal representations created by humans, also reflecting or affecting cultural values, social contexts and political ideologies (Maran et al 2016). Certainly, this last type of investigation is the most relevant for this research; however, the other options offered by Maran et al (2016) may have play a supportive role to the main method adopted.

As regards the fourth type of zoosemiotics, Maran et al (2016) argue that the representation of animals serves many purposes in human culture, from the pedagogical to the symbolical to the anecdotal and so on. In all of them, we find a denotative and a connotative level, as in Barthes (1972, 116; 1977, 45-51). For Barthes, denotation refers to the literal or more evident meaning; connotation, instead, relates to a more hidden or symbolic sense and is influenced by ideology, cultural context, and interpretation. Moreover, connotation sometimes has to do with myths, ideological elements profoundly rooted within a particular society.

The links between Barthes (1972 and 1977) and Maran et al. (2016) call for a research method that fundamentally interrelates a text to the social and cultural environment in which this text has been produced or received. Applying all of this to the analysis of the representation of animals, Maran et al (2016) maintain that denotation mostly regards animals as animals, the scientific knowledge that humans have of non-humans; the connotative level, by contrast, links to the animal as she or he is seen through the human lenses, with all the differences among humans, because of the various cultural, social and political points of view.

This chapter also draws on other scholarship either on literature and animal studies in general, or specifically on Calvino's book. On a more general level, Weil (2012) investigates the representation of animals in literature, from Tolstoy to Rilke to Coetzee. She delves into the question of what we humans can learn from seeing human and non-human behaviours in certain circumstances, for example mourning or animal killing. Wolfe (2003) points out that the question of the animal has for humans mostly ethical implications, as we can see in the way humans treat non-humans' issues related to race, sexuality, and colonialism. Finally, Agamben (2004) examines the division between humans and non-humans through history, from Ancient Greece to the present, and analyses what this division has meant to human knowledge in its various manifestations. Two works relate Calvino's contribution to more general concepts. Marca (2020) explains that humans in Calvino's fairy tales sometimes become animals and by pushing their boundaries they anticipate post-humanism. Iovino (2021) instead argues that Calvino's animals, not only in the fairy tales but in his entire opus, seem to her an epitome of the Anthropocene, symbols of the displacement and extinction that impacts many living beings today. To demonstrate this point, Iovino (2021) underlines that Calvino very often depicts

animals in labs, zoos, or factory farms, three places where human animals exploit non-human animals. Iovino's theory is fascinating and useful for this article because she suggests projecting Calvino's representations of animals to much wider concepts relating to the role of human beings on our whole planet: the Anthropocene for her, and the categories of nature and culture for this work.

As regards semiotics in general, this article also adopts the three seminal categories of icon, index, and symbol (Peirce 1868). A sign is an icon when there is similarity or resemblance between the signifier and signified, as in the case of a photograph *reproducing* the face of a specific person; it is an index when the signifier and signified are linked through logical contiguity or continuity, as in the case of the footprint of an animal; it is a symbol, finally, when the link between the signifier and signified has nothing to do with resemblance or contiguity, but is shared within a community, as in the case of a rose meaning love.

This article has qualitatively sampled some fairy tales rewritten by Calvino relying on qualitative purposive sampling, a nonrandom sampling technique in which the researcher selects participants or items as they represent a particular condition or support a precise theory or present specific characteristics (Morse 2007). In this case, this article has chosen fairy tales in which the represented animals in some ways impact the relationships between nature and culture.

The analysis

In a couple of cases, animals in Calvino's rewritten fairy tales play roles which are usually exclusively human. At the end of these stories, however, the animals become humans. This happens in *Il principe che sposò una rana* (*The prince who got married to a frog*, n. 14), from Monferrato, where the three sons of the king are in search of their spouses. The first two find two girls, while the third one finds a frog. The king has to decide who will inherit his kingdom. To elect the heir, he decides that the three future wives must compete with one another. The son coupled with the winner will be the kingdom's heir. The competition focuses on cultural activities, such as making threads from hemp or raising a dog. The frog does all of this better than the other two girls and wins the competition. However, in the end, the frog turns into a beautiful princess. It turns out that she was previously human but was later transformed into a frog for a spell.

Similarly, in *Il Pappagallo* (*The parrot*, n. 15), likewise from Monferrato, a parrot demonstrates a great ability to tell stories. This is certainly a cultural activity, and what is interesting is that there is no anthropomorphism in her representation. She is fully an animal, and never resembles a human being. Even her ability to speak belongs to parrots, so in this tale, the animal has nothing

human about her. The ability of the parrot is to tell a story that never ends. Every time the tale seems to finish, the animal finds a way to continue the story. This capability makes her powerful, as by inventing a never-ending story she impacts the humans' lives: in fact, enchanted by the story, the girl does not open the door to the King, who is fallen in love with the girl and wants to kidnap her. In this tale, thus, it is the parrot that manages the destinies of non-human animals. Even in this case, however, the animal ends up turning into a man.

In both the above-summarised fairy tales, it seems that leaving these animals as animals would have been too extreme. They would have ended up as individuals, exactly as Sebeok (1968 and 1972) prefigures. The narrative would have represented animals as part of the cultural sphere, doing cultural activities usually reserved for humans (telling stories) and detaching them from nature. Transforming these animals into humans avoids trespassing the traditional boundaries dividing the two realms.

In other fairy tales, these boundaries are certainly more blurry. For example, in *La fiaba dei gatti* (*The tale of cats*, n. 129), from Apulia, a group of cats are organized by Mamma gatta (mother cat) in order to carry out the housekeeping in a home. One concentrates on the laundry, another takes water from the well, another makes the bread, and so on. Importantly, there are no signs of anthropomorphism in these representations, apart from the recurring fact that, apart from meowing, they can speak human language and communicate with humans. At the end of the day, they eat along with the girl they have worked with. When the girl's sister, however, mistreats the cat, Mamma gatta changes her approach to humans and marginalises her by feeding the woman bad food. It is animals, thus, who play a more active role, deciding the destiny of humans. As in many theories mentioned above, we can see that zoosemiotically, animals play powerful roles within society (Mäekivi 2012). The traditional human-centred society here seems to be completely subverted. These fairy tales tell us that a community may be led by living beings in general, no matter whether human or non-human. As a result, we may say that nature (the whole of the human beings) has produced culture (the activities that form society). The wall between nature and culture has been torn down, as hoped for by Martinelli (2010).

In *La biscia* (*The grass snake*, n. 12), again coming from the Piedmont area of Monferrato, there is no hint at anthropomorphism in representing the animal. She is a snake and the only characteristic she has beyond what a snake can in reality do, is that she can speak, even though she does it very rarely. This ability seems to be a narrative necessity more than a human resemblance, as it does not give the animal other human characteristics. The animal, rather, has superpowers that make her different from non-human animals. The first two girls who meet her go away terrified. The third one, the sister of the two girls,

takes her at home. As a reward, the snake gives her superpowers which will make her very rich and eventually a queen. But this will cause jealousy and envy in the family, and in the end, death. What is relevant is that there is no human who leads or supervises the snake in what she does. Non-human animals here own that individuality which Sebeok (1968 and 1972) theorises. In this, she is profoundly an animal, yet she is also an individual. What is more, the story unveils human misery (jealousy and envy) from the point of view of the non-human animal. The animal enters the human realm to highlight human weaknesses. She shapes human relationships, interacts with humans without assuming their characteristics, communicates with them in her proper language, the magic: a cultural activity, thus, exerted as an animal but deeply affecting humans.

Another interesting tale that highlights the relationships between nature and culture is *Il linguaggio degli animali* (*The language of animals*, n. 23), from the city of Mantova. In it, a boy is told by his father to learn other human languages, but he prefers to study the language of animals so that, he is able to understand what animals say. This will save his life as well as other people's lives, as animals also understand the language of humans, and give away some secrets of the family of the boy, and alert him to his own father's attempt to kill him.

Here, it is a human animal, the boy, who plays a cultural role with his ability to understand other languages. However, animals are here represented as rationally communicating with each other, through a codified language, as also advanced by zoosemiotics (Maran et al. 2011). In this fairy tale, the animals seem the same as in many zoosemiotic theories stating that animals communicate, are active, make decisions and shape their destiny. This is exactly what frogs, horses, and other non-human animals do in this story. Moreover, they also understand humans, while humans believe that they do not. Thus, animals are somehow superior to humans in cultural terms, as they form together a working society, while humans do not collaborate and even hate each other, as in the case of the relationships between father and son.

In *La volpe Giovannuzza* (*The fox Giovannuzza*, n. 185), the Sicilian version of Perrault's *Puss in Boots*, this superiority concerns morality and dignity. A passive and not very brilliant boy, after his father's death, risks suffering from hunger and poverty. The fox Giovannuzza takes care of him and, understanding the gravity of the situation, constructs an invented world around the boy made up of wealth, luxury, and nobility, inventing the fact that the boy is actually a count. The human society, including the king, falls for the ruse and flatters the boy, who even gets married to the king's daughter, thereby literally becoming a noble. However, intelligence is only the first quality demonstrated by Giovannuzza. She is also stereotyped, as foxes usually are in folklore and literature, as smart and cunning. At the end of the story, in fact, the new prince shows signs of ingratitude.

The fox, to test his sentiments, pretends to be dead and the prince refuses to bury her and prefers to dump her corpse in the countryside. In face of this lack of sensibility, Giovannuzza reminds the prince of what happened in the past and her role in the fortune of the man and goes away not saying anything else. The text underlines this sign of great dignity in response to human arrogance. Again, non-human animals show themselves to be superior to human ones not only in nature-related animal characteristics, but also in cultural traits, abilities, and sentiments usually reserved for human animals.

This dynamic is even more clear in *L'uccel bel-verde* (*The beautiful-green bird*, n. 87), from Florence, where a bird is used by two women in order to punish their sister, who has married the king and has thus provoked envy and jealousy in them. Relevantly, at the end of the story, the bird becomes aware of being exploited, understands the injustice that the third sister is enduring, and refuses to exert her superpowers, namely, to transform people talking to her into statues. Moreover, the bird has a fundamental and active role in establishing the truth, informing the King and denouncing any form of injustice. Finally, her cultural role (this has nothing to do with nature) is completed when she decides the punishment for the guilty humans, a penalty that the humans carry out diligently. The animal thus assumes the role of the judge condemning the humans. In this sense, she affects reality and plays an active role in society, as pointed out by zoosemiotics (Maran et al. 2011).

Again, the active role within society, the ability to interact and organize the life of other beings, and the capability of feeling sentiments, all of which usually belonging to humans only, emerge as traits of non-human animals, who play relevant roles in these tales adapted by Calvino. In all of the cases mentioned in this section, non-human animals show cultural attitudes that are usually ascribed only to human animals. Thus, these stories upend the traditional notion separating a cultural area, where humans are in charge, from nature, traditionally seen as the non-human animal realm.

Results

This study has highlighted that in Calvino's collected fairy tales there is no unilateral approach to the issue of non-human animals positioning between nature and culture. The first two analysed stories, for example, represent animals that appear to belong in the field of culture only. At the end of the story, in fact, the reader discovers that they were human animals earlier, that they were transformed into animals by a spell, and that, just before the conclusion of the tale, they become humans again. There is only a hint at the fact that non-human animals may belong to the cultural realm. This revolutionary view,

however, is turned upside-down in the final part, where the story leaves room for the old view considering animals as part of the natural realm exclusively, and the two areas as separated and in contrast with one another.

Importantly, other fairy tales move the representation of non-human animals towards the cultural terrain. As theorised by zoosemiotics, in them non-human animals carry out roles that very often pertain to humans, such as working, producing goods, interacting among themselves and with humans, playing relevant roles in society (e.g. the judge), feeling sentiments, and showing dignity and ethical principles. They not only laugh but are also ironic, each of them in a highly individualized way, as happens in another of Calvino's (1972) books, *Le città invisibili*, as argued by Nannicini (2008), mentioned earlier in my study. These animals impact the lives of humans by making decisions and producing meaning more than the human characters. In all of this, we may find them belonging to the sphere of culture.

Moreover, these non-human animals are very often original in two ways: firstly, they do not present human physical features; secondly, they are never seen as representatives of one animal species, with the characteristics of their animal group; rather, they are individually depicted, each of them with peculiar traits. As a result, there is no space for anthropomorphism or stereotype, that is, the way in which non-human animals are represented within the traditional paradigm conceived by zoosemiotics (Martinelli 2010). Their depictions may be better understood through the above-mentioned theories of icon, index, and symbol (Peirce 1868) and of denotation and connotation of animals in human representations (Barthes 1972 and 1977; Maran et al. 2016). Semiotics is in fact a human method of inquiry that analyses human or non-human phenomena. It is a human lens that may also investigate animals, nature and every extra-human element. It is thus similar to fairy tales about animals, which are human forms of representation depicting extra-human characters and scenarios. In short, both zoosemiotics and fairy tales about animals are human products in which animals cannot be considered completely by themselves; rather, they are always filtered through the human point of view.

If we analyse the non-human characters of these fairy tales through Peirce's categories what emerges is that they are mostly icons. *La volpe Giovannuzza* (*The fox Giovannuzza*, n. 185), for example, may only in part be considered a symbol of cunningness, which is a stereotypical trait of foxes. Giovannuzza is a symbol of cunningness (and a stereotype of the fox) when she cleverly grasps how to exploit some abilities of the boy. However, what delineates this character is the dignity she shows when she becomes aware of being neglected by the person she had benefited. Giovannuzza shows dignity and moral strength, and this only pertains to this character, and not to the fox in general. This makes her

a complete and credible character. There is no symbolism in her behaviour, only the individuality of her iconicity.

Similarly, L'uccel bel-verde, the main character of the homonymous story (*The beautiful-green bird*, n. 87), cannot be seen as a symbol. Again, when she refuses to use her superpower and become the judge deciding the punishment for the bad humans, she is a character in her own right. She does not symbolise anything but shows her individual way of connecting to other living beings and balancing injustice. Like the previous character, she is an icon, only resembling herself. There are no references in the tale to universal behaviours or prototypes. L'uccel bel-verde reflects only herself.

This is a significant point as usually non-human animals in classical fairy tales work differently. In Aesop's (1894) *The Fox and the Grapes*, for example, the fox symbolises all the living beings who deem themselves superior and cannot recognise their own limits. Again by Aesop (1894), in *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, the two animals symbolise two opposite ways of behaving in terms of spending time and preparing for the future, and this regards the entirety of living beings. None of this happens to the animal main characters of Calvino's fairy tales, where they are, as I discuss above, individuals who only refer to themselves. Future research might apply the categories of nature and culture and zoosemiotics to other traditional fairy tales, as this study has done to Calvino's fairy tales. In terms of the opposition between denotation and connotation, non-human animals, in these stories, are as connoted as humans. In fact, their denotation is almost totally absent. We rarely see them as expressions of their literal meaning, only as animals, that is, as denotations (Barthes 1972, 116; 1977, 45-51). They are connoted, as they play cultural roles, participate in human society, communicate with both humans and non-humans, all of which places them in the sphere of culture. Their differences are in fact cultural. They reflect various mindsets, points of view, emotions, opinions, abilities, and meanings they create. They make objects and artefacts as humans do in traditional representations. This makes these animals cultural beings, as in Maran et al (2016). If we look at some of Calvino's fairy tales through the lens of the relationships between nature and culture, we can see that they prefigure a position of the non-human animals which is really similar to that theorised by zoosemiotics. In brief, non-human animals are represented as making goods, having a role in the society formed by both humans and non-humans, showing dignity and being individuals, and are not mere symbols of human ideas or concepts. All of this means that they belong to the field of culture. If in other books by Calvino, non-human animals acquire individuality through allegory, melancholy, and irony (Nannicini 2008), in his fairy tales they do so by managing the law, making goods, and showing dignity. Prefiguring Mäekivi (2012), they

play relevant social roles. All of this makes them cultural beings, a definition that traditionally was only given to human beings.

Thus, this study has added something new to Iovino's (2021) point. It is certainly true that in many of his works Calvino represents animals in displacement and as the sad result of Anthropocene. In other cases, by contrast, and specifically in the rewriting of Italian fairy tales, he nevertheless depicts animals as joining human animals in the sphere of culture. This may be read as a kind of reaction to what was signalled by Iovino (2021). If, in some cases, animals are exploited and abused by human animals, in others we can see, optimistically, a form of reaction and a way to salvation. Non-human animals can belong to culture and thus flee the cruel fate that Anthropocene usually leaves them to.

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