At the Olympic games in Athens in 2004, millions worldwide watched colour-ful birds and frogs dancing in the great arena. This performance celebrated the historical fact that choruses consisting of animals (among other strange entities such as cities, cargo ships and poets) were employed by the great comic playwrights of classical Athens. Whether they dance or are served as dishes, animals are, it seems to us, one of the most striking features of Old Comedy from "brekekekex koax koax" to the super dish of Ecclesiazusae.

Having turned her 2002 thèse de Doctorat into a full-length monograph, Corbel-Morana presents a study of the symbolic and dramatic function of animals in Aristophanic comedy. It is well written, thorough and—in these times—curiously devoid of modern theoretical discourse. The spirit of prominent scholars like Taillardat, Vidal-Naquet, Carrière and Thiercy is felt on nearly every page of this study. However, if the reader expects this study to take a modern anthropological or a Bakhtinian carnivalesque or dialogical course (her idea of carnivalism owes its approach to Carrière, not to Bakhtin, pp. 107-8), or to include a discussion of the modern approaches to humour or metaphors (Baudelaire's De l'essence du rire figures in the bibliography), he or she will be disappointed.

In this study, Corbel-Morana argues convincingly that Aristophanes and the poets of Old Comedy employ animal imagery in order to characterize the inhabitants of the comic universe, and that this imagery is grounded in Greek culture, from Homer onwards. The uncivilized nature of animals, the natural joys of eating and sex are all utopian elements in Old Comedy, and “forces dionysiaques” of carnival, which Aristophanes uses to criticize the real Athens (ch. 1). Corbel-Morana also argues that the poets of Old Comedy, inspired by the iambos and by Semonides, actively employ the negative aspects of the animals to satirize the politicians. She contends that the diet of the demagogues becomes a signifier of their characters; Cleon, the fish-eater, becomes a parasite. However, the Aristophanic imagery is more than simply eating animals, and Corbel-Morana argues that the zoon politikon of the civilized polis is mirrored in the animal allegories (as in the dog scene in Wasps) as a means of political invective. And thus what initially were metaphoric (e.g. Cleon the watchdog) and metonymic (e.g. fishes for the parasite) uses of the animal imagery can undergo a complete metamorphosis, in which the civilized human, the zoon politikon, becomes a real animal. In Birds, Aristophanes stages not only
birds being turned towards the human civilization, but also humans being
turned towards the animal kingdom in their quest for wings, and thus the play-
wright depicts the conflict of law (nomos) and nature (physis) through these
metamorphoses (ch. 4). This part of the study is clearly the strongest and most
interesting, and though I was not always persuaded on the larger questions,
Corbel-Morana offers plenty of interesting points, which need to be taken into
account.

In the second part of the study, Corbel-Morana turns to the performance
and the poetics of the plays. In the spirit of carnivalism, she argues that
Aristophanes uses high lyric styles of tragedy and the New Dithyramb and
turns them upside down in his plays in order to celebrate his own genre and
himself as a poet. The manner in which Corbel-Morana detects traces of the
New Dithyramb seems persuasive to me, and the change in musical ethos must
have been felt in many serious and non-serious performances by the end of
the fifth century. Nonetheless, this part of the study disappoints the present
reviewer, since the question of animal symbolism is often lost in the long dis-
cussions of e.g. whether or not the frogs were in the orchestra (Corbel-Morana
argues that they were), and the actual performance of the parodos of Birds.

Corbel-Morana is clearly well at home in Aristophanes, but her approach is
founded on some unproven ‘facts’, e.g. the assumption that the animal choruses
of the sixth century were cultic and direct forerunners of Old Comedy—as if
all choruses of Old Comedy consisted of animals (which does not seem to have
been the case)—and that the parabasis was a ritual relic (here I missed studies
postdating Webster and Sifakis). Trying to figure out the number of choreutai
in the comic chorus (pp. 282-9), Corbel-Morana counts the entering birds in
this complex parodos in the same manner as Triclinius did, never doubting
the reliability of the scholia. There are four scholia that discuss the number
of choreutai in comedy: 1) Scholia in Eq. 598 a (I) vet. VΕΓΘM; 2) Scholia in
Eq. 598 b (I) Triclinii. Lh; 3) Scholia in Ach. ad 211 (scholia vetera et recentiora
Triclinii); 4) Scholia in Av. ad 297 (scholia vetera). They all agree on the number
twenty-four; however—and this is usually ignored, and Corbel-Morana is no
exception—these scholia exhibit a disturbing lack of knowledge of the fifth-
century dramatic institution, e.g. the scholiast of (1) explains that the
choreutai were men, woman and children, which to my knowledge is complete wrong;
choreutai in Athens were all men. The scholiast also gives some ludicrous rules
for half-choruses, and since all the other scholia depend on this scholium (1),
they should all be doubted. Perhaps there were twenty-four choreutai, but mak-
ing the four first birds in the parodos a secondary chorus (as Corbel-Morana
opts for) or whatever (expert dancers or aulètai), seems risky. We simply do