

## The Animalistic Genre in the Works of Barbara Frischmuth

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### Abstract

The purpose of the article is to consider the originality of the art world of the contemporary Austrian writer Barbara Frischmuth who created in the novel *Mistress of the Animals* a unique "animalistic context". Frischmuth explores human nature through the images of the animal world, in connection with which the author of the article adheres to the term "human-animal studies". "Human-animal studies" in the works of the writer have a mythological nature, with the help of which Frischmuth illustrates the modern world. The relevance of the study is dictated by the inadequate exploration in homeland literary studies of the Austrian writer B. Frischmuth. Hence, considering the work of the Austrian writer in this context, this research is an attempt to pastose the generalised characteristic of "animalier art". The undertaken study considers the understudied topical problems of modernity, given the literary experience of Barbara Frischmuth. In the animal work Frishmuths "anthropological" and "zoological" are transformed in a specific synthesis; this duality characterises animal characters in her works, and would become a hallmark of her work.

**Keywords:** Animalier Art, B. Frischmuth, Austrian literature, "Human-Animal Studies", Mythologism

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## Introduction

The modern Austrian writer and translator Barbara Frischmuth (1941) logically fits in the literary context of her time, along with such well-known authors as E. Jelinek, P. Handke, T. Bernhard, I. Bachmann, belonging to the "star galaxy" of Austrian literature in the second half of the twentieth century.

Multifaceted creativity of Frishmuths is of interest to both the Russian and the foreign scholars (Gürtler,1985; Kravchuk,1998; Polat-Menke, 2013; Dautov et al., 2018; Tabaalite,2011; Vorotnikova, 2008).

The writer, open to the whole world, has enriched Austrian literature with the works, the problems of which are relevant to this day, as they are connected with the inner world of man, the role of women in the modern world, and the relationships between East and West that concern all of humanity (Bozhkova et al., 2019).

The works of the contemporary writer Barbara Frischmuth are in sync with the times. In her works, it is easy to find the "problematic topics" of our time. Frischmuth creates an individual artistic world, following the Austrian tradition, which includes in the narrative a fantastic element and philosophical reflections. B. Frischmuth is the author of numerous novelettes, novels, and books for children. This author is able not only to convey her ideas to the reader, but also to force critical thinking about life.

Earlier, the author analysed the problem of fabulousness in the works of Barbara Frischmuth (Trophimova, 2015).

Describing the work of the Austrian writer, A.V. Plakhina emphasises that her books combine the fabulous with the real, mythological past with the living modernity. However, fantasy and dream are not divorced from reality (Plakhina, 2010). Analysing artistic inventions and images in a fantastic work, T. A. Chernysheva comes to the conclusion that they can have a very different appearance and can be based on both ancient images that exist in the human

consciousness and become a product of modernity (Chernysheva, 2015).

## Background

The animalistic genre or animal studies is one of the most interesting genres in art, the art type, the main motive of which is the depiction of animals. Animal studies open a rich and diverse world, the endless space for creativity, give a huge number of images, teach to observe, to study and embody in the works amazing and beautiful images created by nature.

Since ancient times, an animal has been inextricably linked with a person. Evolution gradually opened and expanded the forms of contact with an animal: a domesticated animal became a real partner: dogs protected the herds and dwelling, horses became the object of movement, cows and goats gave milk. An animal gradually became a means of spiritual development of people, the epitome of beauty, perfection (Diamant, 2013).

In ancient times, according to Ye. Nikitina, when the main occupation of the Slavonic people was hunting, people believed that wildlife and humans shared ancestors. Each tribe had its own totem, that is, a sacred animal which tribe worshipped, believing that it was their blood relative (Nikitina, 2015). And in today's world, in recent decades, especially in foreign science, there has been increasing interest in the so-called "human-animal studies", which includes a wide range of approaches to understanding human-animal relationships (Shastina, 2017; Kolesnichenko et al., 2018).

The short novel *Mistress of the Animals (Herrin der Tiere, 1986)* is part of the so-called *Trilogy of Demeter*. The work is devoted to the Greek goddess in the image of a horse. In literary studies, the theme of animalism is not new. It has been well studied in both foreign and domestic literature (Bartsch, 1992; Gürtler,1985, Timofeyeva, 2011 etc.). An aphoristic statement of the Austrian writer E. Canetti in the best way possible characterises this type of relationship: "Whenever you observe an animal closely, you feel as if a human being sitting inside you were

making fun of you" (Canetti, 1990: 252). According to E.M. Shastina, Canetti's book *About Animals (Über Tiere)* is an original literary encyclopedia about animals that have very different features, whereas the "anthropological" component clearly prevails (Shastina, 2014). And Frischmuth, referring to animals, creates her animalistic world, the characters of which do not relinquish man in anything. The figures of animals, namely horses, not only reflect the human traits, but are perceived as a person (Tarman, 2018; Finogentova et al., 2018).

A study of animalism in Frischmuth's works allows not only identifying the features of the writer's mythopoetics, but also comprehending the human attitude to animals, when the image of an animal reflects the humanist identity (Epstein, 1990).

Nobody knows what happens in reality, with such words Frischmuth starts *Mistress of the Animals* (Frischmuth, 1986). Besides, the title itself points to a myth, the origin of which is rooted in the distant past of Canada, Alaska, Siberia, etc., where the goddesses of animals were perceived as the guardians of animal souls. Thus, this work contains echoes of not only Greek mythology, but also of shamanic mythology.

According to Lützeler, Frischmuth decided on the title for this work after reading the study of Hans Peter Duerr *Sedna or Love to Life (Sedna oder die Liebe zum Leben)* (Lützeler, 1992). In his book, Duerr worked on archaic myths about the goddesses of animals in different cultures, the main idea of which is animals' ability to return (Duerr, 1984). In turn, Frishmuth explains that the title of the novel is connected with the agrarian times, when the goddess was responsible for the fertility (Frischmuth, 1991). Sometimes, the mistress of the animals was revered as a goddess of the Earth only in the image of a horse; therefore, as P. M. Lützeler noted, Duerr points to Cretan, and later Greek Demeter – mother of life and the existence of all living things. The magic horse Areion was born from the connection with Poseidon, when Demeter and Poseidon took the images of

horses. According to Kerenyi, Poseidon in Greek mythology is presented as the creator of the horses (Kerenyi, 1951).

Frischmuth depicts a microcosm of an unnamed village, which is located somewhere near the border of Czechoslovakia. The terrain described in the novel is far from idyllic; it presents a contrast to the beauty of the beloved Altaussee – the scene of many of Frischmuth's works. The village of *Mistress of the Animals* is located on the edge of the world; it is in danger of extinction. In the middle of the novel there are complex relationships between people, rarely experiencing the joy of life as a result of the lack of harmony between human and nature.

In the very beginning of the work, it becomes clear that its main character Byokin is not just a hostess; she is the *Mistress of the Animals*. All animals – cats, dogs, horses – have not just nicknames; rather, these are the names of the animals presented as individuals with granted traits. Frischmuth hints at the transformation of an animal into a human and vice versa: "Her legs are like a Centaur's hooves <...> her heart supplies blood to the four-footed body ..." (Frischmuth, 1986: 32).

Frischmuth represents the reality as the world of humans and animals. People engaged in cattle breeding have a fairly introverted lifestyle. It is clear that animal care is troublesome, cleaning the stables does not deliver to employees special pleasure, is often accompanied by vulgar jokes, but that's just the background, because people are driven by the selfless love for horses (Frischmuth, 1986).

According to Frise, the scenes in the stables, cleaning, which does not deliver special pleasure, care for the horses, stupid jokes of uncivilised grooms, are outshined by unselfish love for horses that can be perceived sometimes as an unnecessary, expensive toy, bringing income for existence (Frise, 1992). Frise believes that Frischmuth's Centaurs are "poor fools in pursuit of happiness" ("arme Narren auf der Suche nach Glück") (Frise, 1992: 142). In Greek mythology, centaurs are wild creatures, half-people and half-horses, inhabitants of the mountains and wildwood. Frischmuth modifies

the classic image of a centaur, contributes to the image of the female centaur that is in harmony with nature and living beings. Frischmuth relies on her own experience, because for quite a long time, being a coach's wife, she helped him in the preparation of horses for the tournaments. Frischmuth's story about animals not only has a mythological character, but also reflects the problems of modern society.

It is no coincidence that Frischmuth gives the main character of the work the name Byokin, because stubbornness is a distinguishing feature of Byokin's nature (Kilinc et al., 2018).

Byokin relations with the character-man in years gone by and the birth of the dead child, which can be correlated with the loss of Greek Kore, left an ineradicable mark. From that moment, Byokin has not seen herself in any other relationship. Only charges can understand it and appreciate it. Byokin's friend Geeta believes that only a certain God of stable would inspire Byokin. Mythological signs can be considered in the response of Byokin to friend's offer, that she would prefer a raven-black horse with eyes-embers, with a mane of a raven's feathers and hooves in the form of the moon, and it would be so powerful that at its scream the glasses in window frames would burst, and everyone would feel its power (Frischmuth, 1986). Byokin's dream of a raven horse is associated with witchcraft and with mysterious enchantments. Byokin is fully given to the world of animals, not only to her room, but the whole life from now on is between the stable and the kitchen where she prepares food for her pets. No one working in the stables knows their pets and their habits as good as Byokin does. She treats the animals (Xantipe, Hermes, Franka, Urania, Plurabella, Dracula, etc.) as equal to herself, she can confide them; they never let her down.

The character is a young lady who went against the wishes of her mother and refused to work in the bureau. She only wanted to escape after her dream, link her life with nature. In childhood, she preferred horse-riding to dance lessons. This lifestyle has influenced the formation of the personality of the character. Permanent confrontation with her mother tempered her

character. Byokin has created her own world, where tranquility prevails, far away from the city's bustle. The world of "dumb animals" is a hierarchical system, headed by her as the mistress of the animals. The character of Frischmuth's novel did as a doctor from the "Enchantments" (*Die Verzauberung*) by H. Broch, who leaves the big city to be close to nature (Broch, 1986).

The symbiosis of a human and a horse presented in the story can be traced back during certain sequences of dreams and fantasies, as well as in imitating the mythical plot. Horses are presented in Frischmuth's novel as persons, whose nicknames are partially borrowed from Greek mythology. For example, the stallion Hermes is as agile and quick as its Greek prototype. Byokin merges with her pet Hermes like Centaur. The boundary between a human and an animal in this case will be erased and you receive an image, in which animals' wildness, force and brutality merge with the necessary protection and security. The character realises that a dream may disappear and only a shell from it will remain, that all told dreams are like a "skin of the dead animal, not living in it anymore" (Frischmuth, 1986). Byokin is trying to free herself from norms and rules of life accepted by people, but it is at this point that she realises that her vocation is to serve horses, be their mistress, for which she donated much, taking for herself the only right decision and selecting only one world, which at this point was for her ideal.

## Methods

The humane treatment of "our younger brothers" sounds in the technocratic age even more acute than before, because it is a call to be human under any circumstances.

The material for research is the novel by Frischmuth *Mistress of the Animals (Herrin der Tiere, 1986)*. This study is guided by the methods, which combine the experience of classic literature, domestic and foreign: the biographical method allows tracing the creative evolution of the writer, her internal dynamics, "embeddedness" in society; the cultural-historical method is a way of perception, analysis and evaluation of art works within the cultural-

historical aspect; the receptive method is the reaction of the perceiving consciousness and feelings of the reader to the work, to the artistic world of the author.

To explore the objectives of the study, we examined the features of "human-animal studies" in the works of Barbara Frischmuth as one of the aspects of tolerance, namely the possibility of parallel coexistence and mutual enrichment of the world of animals and humans. The sources of information were the works of the writer, interviews with her, as well as literary criticism.

### Results

In her works, Frischmuth shows that the relationship between man and wildlife are able not only to coexist, but also to cross-pollinate each other. In her opinion, the purpose of the writer is to become a bridge facilitating the attraction of man and the outworld. The main objective of Frischmuth-animalist is the accuracy of presentation of an animal, artistically shaped characteristics, the impartation to animals of the features inherent to people, their actions and experiences.

### Summary

The Austrian writer Barbara Frischmuth in her literary works intends to share with the Western reader her rich experience in exploring wildlife. The animalistic context allows identifying the originality of Frischmuth's poetics. The basis of different forms of anthropopathy and zoomorphathy is the writer's paradigm of the initial "equality" of a human and an animal. It is this work of the Austrian writer that helps not only learn a lot about horses and about the attitude to animals, but also better understand the people who often do not try to save feelings.

### Conclusion

Frischmuth's poetics is characterised by identity that finds expression in the special nature of the mythological perception of reality, particularly in creating her own "animalistic context", which is presented in the analysed novel.

The special nature of the mythological perception of reality allows including into the

narration the fauna, owing to which Frischmuth was able to tell a lot about a person. Portraying an animal is an artistic technique reinforcing the general imagery of the literary text. The images of animals' help typify the necessary features, reproducing the original model of human behaviour.

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