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# THE VIRGIN, THE BEAR, THE UPSIDE-DOWN *STRIX*: AN INTERPRETATION OF ANTONINUS LIBERALIS 21\*

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The story of the *strix* is narrated by Latin literature—and attested in the Greek world—in small, precious fragments.<sup>1</sup> From these, it is possible to rebuild the profile of one of antiquity’s most impressive creatures—a creature that was not, however, clearly delineated even by the ancients themselves.<sup>2</sup> We know that the *strix* was a nocturnal bird of ill-omen associated with the *bubo* and depicted by Ovid as a sort of barn owl;<sup>3</sup> this creature is

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1 Pl. *Ps.* 819–20; Hor. *Epod.* 5.20; Tib. 1.5.52; Prop. 4.5.17; Ov. *Am.* 1.12.17–20, *Fast.* 6.131–68; Petr. 63 and 134.1; Luc. 6.689; Sen. *Herc. F.* 686–88; Plin. *Nat.* 11.232; Quint. *Ser. Lib. Med.* 57; Isid. *Orig.* 11.4.2; Fest. 414.24–31 Lindsay provides some information about this ancient belief in Greece; see note 8.

2 See Plin. *Nat.* 11.232: “esse in maledictis iam antiquis strigem convenit, sed quae sit avium, constare non arbitror,” “It is accepted that the *strix* is already in the ancient curses, but I do not think it is clear what bird this is.” In light of this ancient “confessed uncertainty,” McDonough 1997.326 suggests that we not attempt an exact identification of the *strix* as an animal, but instead consider it “as undefinable, composed of the parts of many fearful animals but identified with no particular one . . . a creature ‘betwixt and between.’”

3 To this end, we will occasionally refer to the Roman representation of the *strix* as “strigiform.” Strigiformes is the name of the order of birds that includes the owls. It is, in fact,

both an ingredient in sorcerers' spells and the flying protagonist of some popular stories drawn from the world of children. But beyond this, the features of the *strix* alternate between those of the supernatural bird of prey, ever thirsty for children's blood, and those of the human *mulier malefica*, in a word the "witch," who changes herself into the bird.

It is a challenge, then, to trace the profile of this creature.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I would like to turn to an ancient source that other scholars have largely ignored in their efforts to recapture the image of the *strix* and use it to illuminate characteristics that have previously escaped notice: chapter 21 of Antoninus Liberalis' *Metamorphoses*. The *Metamorphoses* are prose summaries written in Greek during the second or early third century C.E. by a mythographer intent on preserving the works of Hellenistic authors such as Nicander and Boio. The story on which this essay will focus was taken by Antoninus from Boio's *Ornithogoniae*, which was composed by at least the end of the fourth century B.C.E.<sup>5</sup>

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worth noting what physiognomy the Romans could ascribe to this imaginary creature when it was directly associated with a bird: the *strix*'s *grande caput*, "big head," her *stantes oculi*, "fixed eyes," her *rostra apta rapinis*, "rapacious beak," her *canities pennis*, "white feathers," her *hamus*, "hook" of the claws: Ov. *Fast.* 6.131–34. The identification of both this Ovidian *strix* and the one that appears in Tib. 1.5.49–56 with the strigiform subspecies *Tyto Alba Alba*, commonly called "barn owl," is proposed by Capponi 1979.467 and 1981.302; cf. also André 1967.146 s.v. *strix*. The *strix* of Ov. *Am.* 1.12.17–20, which nests in trees, has been recognized by Capponi as one of the *Striginae*. The *strix* is not always described as a strigiform bird, however, but is often associated with the *bubo*, "horned or eared owl," see Sen. *Her. F.* 686–88, Luc. 6.689, Serv. *G.* 1.470. We also note that the *strix*'s *grande caput* mentioned by Ov. *Fast.* 6.133 seems to be attributed also to the big headed *bubo* into which Ascalaphus turns in Ov. *Met.* 5.547 (*inque caput crescit*, "his head gets bigger"). In similar terms, Sparks and Soper 1978.1 describe the strigiform species: "uccelli da preda dotati di piumaggio morbido, coda breve, grossa testa, occhi grandi e rivolti avanti" ("predatory birds having soft plumage, short tails, and big, forward-facing eyes").

4 For some modern works that try to do so or that touch on this topic, see Oliphant 1913 and 1914, Schuster 1930.173–78, Scobie 1978.74–83, Curletto 1987.150–52, Danese 1995.427–30, Mencacci 1995.230–31, McDonough 1997, Bettini 1998.274 and 373, Johnston 1999.164–67, Cherubini 2005.

5 See the text as edited by Papathomopoulos 1968.36–37. On Antoninus Liberalis and the *Metamorphoses* attached to his name, see Papathomopoulos 1968.ix–xxix, Papathomopoulos 1962; cf. remarks by Kenney 1969. For some works based on this ancient source, cf. Leitaio 1995, Davidson 1997. We can identify the late fourth century B.C.E. as a relatively exact *terminus ante quem* for dating Boio's *Ornithogoniae* since we know that they were known by Philochorus of Athens, an antiquarian of Alexander's age; see Ath. 9.393, which I discuss in more detail in Cherubini 2005.21 note 40. On dating Philochorus's activity, cf. Jacoby 1923–58 *FGrH* 3b (suppl.) 328.220ff.

According to Boio, Poliphonte, the daughter of Thraissa and Hipponoos, refuses Aphrodite and wanders through the mountains as a follower of Artemis. It is her rejection of Aphrodite—that is, her determination to remain a virgin—that initiates her troubles: Aphrodite inspires within her an insane passion for a bear. Poliphonte's shameful union with the animal, in turn, causes Artemis to drive all the animals of the mountain to chase after her. After having run to her father's house, Poliphonte gives birth to Agrios and Oreios, two cannibalistic giants, who disregard the gods as well as the rules of human society; their actions bring on Zeus's displeasure, and in order to prevent Hermes from mutilating the sons, Ares turns all three into birds of ill-omen. Oreios becomes a malevolent λαγῶς, a term of uncertain meaning that could indicate a long-eared owl (a *bubo*);<sup>6</sup> Agrios becomes a γύψ, a vulture hated by humans and gods that continuously desires human blood and flesh. As for Poliphonte, she is transformed into a στῦξ (a variant of στρίγξ/στρίξ):<sup>7</sup>

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6 We have no clear explanation for this bird's name: Hsch. Schmidt s.v.; Porf. *ad Serm.* 2.2.22: *lagois avis leporini coloris*, "the *lagois* is a hare-colored bird"; see Papat homopoulos 1968.117 note 18, Celoria 1992.163 note 248, André 1967.97 s.v., Thompson 1936 s.v. However, the link between *strix*, *vultur*, and *bubo* that is frequently made in the Roman sources (Ov. *Am.* 1.12.17–20, Sen. *Herc. F.* 686–88) seems to suggest in Boio's text the same nocturnal triad of ill-omen. The Greek term λαγῶς/λαγῶς refers to the "hare" and seems to be a compound formed by \*λάγος, "soft," and the root of οὖς, "ear"; see Chantraine 1968 s.v. This kind of denomination is transferred to other animals, cf. *lepus marinus*, which is the mollusk *aplysia depilans* with its tentacles like ears. The λαγῶς of the Poliphonte myth could also be a sort of hare-bird that was in some manner remarkable for its ears; it would perhaps be similar to the so-called λαγωδίας, mentioned by Ath. 390f as an ὄτοξ, "a horned or eared owl" corresponding to the Latin *bubo*; see Liddell and Scott s.v.; a kind of owl, "une chouette remarquable par ses oreilles, ce qui explique le rapprochement avec λαγῶς": Chantraine 1968 *ibidem*. We may agree that the λαγῶς is just a *bubo*, considering that the so-called *bubo bubo* has big, eye-catching ears with long, soft tufts of feathers; cf. Scobie 1978.80, who calls it "long-eared," Sparks and Soper 1978.179. Such ears enhance its typically large head, which Ovid ascribes to the *striges* in *Fast.* 6.133 and to Ascalaphus-*bubo* of *Met.* 5.547.

7 The only manuscript of Antoninus Liberalis—*Palatinus Heidelbergensis Graecus* 398 (P)—shows the form στῦξ; see Papat homopoulos 1968.xxiiiif., who chooses the correction στῦξ proposed by Martini in 1896. In his 1774 edition of the text, Verheyk corrected the word to στρίξ/στρίξ; see Papat homopoulos 1968.36. However, it is possible to think of the form στῦξ simply as a variant; cf. Chantraine 1968 s.v. στυνέω. Oliphant 1913.138 note 11 suggests a sort of popular etymology in which στῦξ from στυνέω, "hate," would mean "hateful bird." We can find other traces of this variant in the *styx* of Hyg. *Fab.* 28.4 and in the στῦξ of Hesychius's gloss (Hsch. Schmidt s.v.), explained as "the owl, the bird," and mentioned at p. 89 of this article.

φθεγγομένη νυκτὸς ἄτερ σίτου καὶ ποτοῦ, τὴν κεφαλὴν  
ἵσχουσα κάτω, τοὺς δὲ πόδας ἄκρους ἄνω, πολέμου καὶ  
στάσεως ἀνθρώποις ἄγγελος,

. . . that sings in the night without food nor drink, who  
keeps her head turned down and the tips of her feet up, a  
messenger of war and discord for human beings.

After our protagonist's rejection of Aphrodite, the spark that inflames the entire plot of this story, the myth's development combines two different but evidently related motifs: the union between the maiden and the bear and, the other, her subsequent metamorphosis into a particular bird of ill-omen. My goal, then, is to reconstruct the cultural meaning of this story—and at the same time the relationship that links these two main themes—by searching for the symbolic mechanisms that traditional belief may have embedded within the plot. According to P. M. C. Forbes Irving (1990.25–26), after all, the knowledge revealed by the myths that Antoninus Liberalis attributes to Boio, “(though it may be tempered to some extent by natural observation or judgement) is primarily a knowledge of traditional belief.” Considering the issue in the light of the literary and folkloric career of the supernatural bird that devours children and that, as mentioned above, was possibly well known in Greece,<sup>8</sup> we can suppose that some traditional ideas contributed to the image of Poliphonte as a *strix*—and also to the *strix*'s interpretation as an inverted figure. Before discussing this point, however, I shall first review what we know about ancient traditions concerning bears in order to consider how the bear may contribute to the ultimate meaning of this myth.

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8 Fest. 414.24–31 Lindsay. As reconstructed by Lindsay 1913, the text can be presented as follows: “stri<gem, ut ait Verr>ius Graeci στρίγγα ap<pellan>t maleficis mulieribus nomen inditum est, quas volaticas etiam vocant. Itaque solent his verbis eas veluti avertere Graeci: ἡ στρίγγ' ἀποπέμπειν νυκτιβόαν, τὸν στρίγγ' ἀπὸ λαῶν ὄρνιν ἀνωνόμιον ὠκυπόρου ἐπὶ νῆας,” “According to Verrius, the *strix* is called by the Greeks *strinx*, and the name is attributed to malefic women, also called ‘those who fly.’ And the Greeks used to chase it away with these words: ‘go away *strix* screaming at night, go away *strix* from the peoples, bird that cannot be named, on the fast ships going far away.’” On similar spells against Gello in the *Kyranides*, see Johnston 1995.384–87 and 1999.166; see also the amulet against *nyctalopas*: “id est adversus nocturnas aves hoc est strigas sive cavanias,” “Nyctalopas, that is nocturnal birds like *striges* or owls,” *Damigéron-Évax* 28.1 in Halleux and Schamp 1985.266–67. Festus's text clearly identifies the *striges* with the *maleficae mulieres*, the witches.

## 1. THE BEAR'S WIFE

At the center of the story, sexual union with a hairy beast is the punishment that Aphrodite herself inflicts on Poliphonte, the maiden who was guilty of preferring the virginal habits of Artemis to the wedding,<sup>9</sup> and who, living in the mountains, left undone the most important ritual that awaited her as a woman. Some later protagonists of similar tales are as wild as Poliphonte was: young shepherdesses who fearlessly cross the borderlines between the village and the mountain, pickers of fruit who like to stay late in the forest, lonely young ladies who go to a bear's lair and become its wife. Poliphonte's story is indeed a literary precedent of the "Bear's Wife motif" (Corvino 2000.280, Pastoureau 2007.50), attested in the folklore of many different cultures from the Pyrenees, to Northern Europe, to central and northern America, to the eastern regions of the world, where either this beast and its human wife or their half-blood children are the protagonists: wild boys such as Jean de l'Ours, who are gifted with special virtues useful for the moment when they tire of the cavern and want to return to a human village. We can easily study the links between these stories thanks to the work of several scholars, along with the stories collected in a recent book on the bear's symbolism and cultural history by the French medievalist Michel Pastoureau (2007).<sup>10</sup> But we must also remember that Claude Lévi-Strauss gives some remarkable accounts of the Bear's Wife motif when he discusses the Gold tribe of the Amur River, where the tradition of giving a girl to her mother's brother in marriage commemorates a legend according to which "a woman is carried off by a bear, by whom she has a daughter. This woman's brother finds her, kills the bear, and frees her and her child, whom he marries" (Lévi-Strauss 1969.304). Stories much like these are told among the Native Americans of the northwest coast, where,

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9 See Pellizer 1982.28, who points out the normative role of this and other similar myths that all seem to address the correct incorporation of adolescents into adult society.

10 See Saxo Gram. 10.15 and Guillelm. Alvern. *de Univ.* 3.25; cf. Pastoureau 2007.109–14. Similar stories are frequent in Scandinavian and Lappish folklore; see Edsman 1956. Prosper Mérimée used this motif in its Russian version for his novella *Lokis* (1868); see Pastoureau 2007.285–90. On similar tales in the Pyrenees, see Alford 1930.268. Fabre (1993.11) recalls the character called Jean de l'Ours, also famous in the Russian variant collected by Afanasjev 2001.93–95. For Northern Mexico, see Barakat 1965.331–34. For this motif in the Crow, Blackfoot, and Assiniboin cultures, see Comba 1996.34–35. It's probably worth noting an interesting reference in Toynbee 1996.99 (pl. 37) to a bronze group now in the Bern Historical Museum where the tame bear possessed by the Gaulish goddess Artio "seems to cause her some embarrassment by its affectionate forwardness."

as Lévi-Strauss points out, there are tales about a princess who married a stranger who turned out to be a bear; after having eaten her husband's food and allowed him a kiss, she eventually grew a long beard—or about a woman who married a bear and gave birth to a bear cub. According to Lévi-Strauss, these are clear cultural examples of “immoderate exogamy” (Lévi-Strauss 1982.95 and 102; cf. Comba 1996.34–35).

But in order to focus more closely on our Greek variant of the Bear's Wife motif, I would like to show, first, that the beast that Aphrodite chooses as a mate for the chaste maiden is specially marked, it is not a common mate in ancient imagery. An eloquent ancient dossier makes the male and female bear the most fierce and violent of the wild beasts,<sup>11</sup> ascribing to them an inborn *furor*, “rage, madness” (Hor. *Ars* 472; cf. Mart. 6.64.27–32) and the proverbial *rabies*, “anger” (Luc. 6.220, 222, Plin. *Nat.* 8.130). The bear is also described as *funestus*, “deadly” (Apul. *Met.* 7.24), *truculentus*, “cruel” (Ov. *Met.* 13.803), *ferus*, “wild” (Sen. *Oed.* 151), and *trux*, “fierce” (Val. Flacc. 2.73), and gifted with an *ingenium immansuetum*, “uncontrollable nature” (Ov. *Met.* 15.85). The bear's cry is described by the verb *saevire*, “to rage” (Verg. *A.* 7.17), and even when it is drinking, this animal *aquam morsu vorat*, “devours water with bites” (Plin. *Nat.* 10.201). These are the fierce beasts that Oppian will call a φόνιον γένος, a “bloody race” gifted with κάρχαρον, οὐλόμενον . . . στόμα, “a deadly mouth with sharp teeth,” and an ἄγριον ἦτορ, “fierce heart” (Opp. *C.* 3.139–45). And after all, as we know from Ammianus Marcellinus, the emperor Valentinianus II seemed to nourish his own fierceness by feeding human corpses to the *luctificus calor* (“deadly ferocity”)<sup>12</sup> of two she-bears (Amm. Marc. 29.3).<sup>13</sup> But in spite

11 In a Carthaginian mosaic, we can see two bears named Crudelius and Omicida; see Toynbee 1996.97. On the proverbial fierceness of bears in antiquity, cf. Bettini 2008.84ff. For late antiquity and the Middle Ages, see Andreolli 1988 and Pastoureau 2007.103, 237ff., 274ff., and 157ff. with some references to the Bible. As for the perception of the fierceness of the bear for the North American Indians, see Comba 1996.23–24. Lastly, we must briefly mention the figure of the Viking *berserkr*, a term that seems to mean “bear-shirt” and identifies selected fierce warriors who, according to Old Norse literature, used to fight with unusual strength while possessed by a sort of ecstatic ferocity (the so-called *berserkgang*), screaming like wild beasts, and biting their shields. The meaning of the term is probably a reference to the warriors' shape-changing as man-bears or to the bear skins they may have worn: Lindow 1995.115; cf. Grønbech 1996.297, Bettini 2008.86.

12 The term *calor* means both “wrath” and “bodily heat, passion” (*OLD* s.v.), so here it might indicate the she-bear's rage as well as her famous reproductive heat; cf. what Oppian says about she-bears' lust at p. 84 of this essay.

13 Similarly on Galerius, cf. Lact. *Mort. Persec.* 21.5–6; see Andreolli 1988.31.

of the fact that ancient people saw bears as scary beasts, they seemingly looked at these animals as if they were semi-human; so Oppian reminds us that rage is just the last of many points that, in the ancient world, invited humans to see in the bear a mirror for themselves. The perception of a physical affinity between humans and bears, as scholars point out (Corvino 2000.283–84, Scanlon 2002.154 and 162, Pastoureau 2007.87–119), makes the second a beastly double of the first. A man can turn into a bear just by being covered with hair; this is demonstrated, for example, by what happened to Trasileon in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* when he unhappily agreed to be sewn into a bear's fur during a robbery and was then slaughtered by dogs and men who took the disguise as true (Apul. *Met.* 4.15).<sup>14</sup>

We already know that the physical resemblance between bear and man was observed in detail by ancient naturalists. The erect posture that, in Xenophon's opinion, allows only men to gaze at things far away (Xen. *Mem.* 1.4.11) and that, for Ovid, has been given to them *ad sidera tollere vultus*, "to look up to the stars" (Ov. *Met.* 1.75; cf. Sen. *Dial.* 8.5.4), is attributed by Aristotle to bears as well (Arist. *HA* 8.5 [594b]); in fact, as Pliny remarks, they *ingrediuntur et bipedes*, "walk on two feet" (Plin. *Nat.* 8.130). Aristotle notes also that the bear is endowed, like humans, with only one stomach (Arist. *HA* 2.17 [507b]), and it is, like humans, an omnivore (Arist. *HA* 8.5 [594b]); he knows well that for Anaxagoras διὰ τὸ χεῖρας ἔχειν φρονιμώτατον εἶναι τῶν ζώων ἄνθρωπον, "Man is the wisest of the living beings since he has hands" (Arist. *PA* 4.10 [687a 8]), and he also points out how the bear's paws are endowed with five fingers with three finger joints (Arist. *HA* 2.1 [498a]). More explicitly, Oppian will say that wild bears have χεῖρες χερσὶ βροτῶν ἴκελαι, πόδες αὖτε πόδεσσι, "hands like human hands, and feet like human feet" (Opp. *C.* 3.144).<sup>15</sup>

All in all, given the erect posture from which they look up to the sky, their omnivore diet, and their manual dexterity similar to that of humans,

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14 Cf. Bettini 2008.84ff. To understand how enduring this motif will be, we briefly recall the tale entitled "Bearskin" collected in Grimm and Grimm 2006.35–357 in which a man is told by the Devil to wear a bear's fur without cutting his nails and hair for seven years; he then will return to his human appearance in order to marry his beloved.

15 "Hands and feet" like these should be really precious, since ancient people used to say that during hibernation bears only fed themselves by sucking their front paws, so they seem to mime humans bringing food to the mouth with their hands; see Plin. *Nat.* 8.54, Opp. *C.* 3.174. On this and the points mentioned above, see Corvino 2000 *ibidem*.



bears compete with humans both physically and mentally.<sup>16</sup> What is more, bears imitate man in their manner of mating, causing people to think that they are even able to replace men in a union with human females. Only the naturalists' works of the seventeenth century will abandon what was a common view in antiquity: bears mate in a disturbingly human position (cf. Pastoureau 2007.101). Pliny hands down to the Middle Ages the enduring opinion that bears mate "*nec vulgari quadrupedum more, sed ambobus cubantibus complexisque*," "not as the other four-footed animals generally do, but lying down and embracing" (Plin. *Nat.* 8.126);<sup>17</sup> to make this even clearer, he says that in mating they lie down *humanitus*, "like human beings" (Plin. *Nat.* 10.56). It is worth considering, moreover, that we are told by Oppian that the she-bear gives birth to tiny, shapeless cubs (cf. Arist. *HA* 6.30 [579a], Plut. *Mor.* 494c, Ael. *NA* 2.19 and 6.3, Plin. *Nat.* 8.54, Suet. *Verg.* 22) because of an incredible lust: she-bears, in fact, chase the males, conceiving new offspring when already pregnant, and give birth to unformed cubs in order to mate again as soon as they can (Opp. *C.* 3.146–68).

It seems that Poliphonte's transgressive adherence to absolute chastity was punished by Aphrodite by condemnation to a state that represents the degradation of the normal wedding that she had refused. The angry goddess responds to this rejection with a beastly bridegroom and by making the disdainful maiden succumb to the union with all her ardor—an ardor with which, according to Oppian, she-bears themselves pursue their males. Who could better play the role of the bridegroom in such a drama than a bear with the indomitable *furor* that makes it the king of the wild domain—the wild domain that alone attracted Poliphonte? What could be better than the bear's appearance of disguised humanness that in one body represents both the human and the savage,<sup>18</sup> than the bear's manner of performing sexual intercourse *more hominum*?

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16 Comba (1996.28 and 39) points out that, in the Lakota culture, the bear is represented as the only animal able to walk upright like a man and as the most similar to humans in behavior, cleverness, and diet; the Lakota shamans' language calls it *hunonpa*, "two-legged"—a term that generally refers to human beings.

17 Pliny follows Aristotle's assertion that she-bears do not mate by waiting for the males to mount them but rather by lying down; see Arist. *HA* 6.30 [579a], 5.2 [540a].

18 Scanlon 2002.161 analyzes this episode and draws conclusions that are, in part, similar to our own: "Very human in appearance and characteristics . . . the beast therefore bridges the gap between the savage and the tame." And again at 163: "Her unholy commingling with a bear marks the confusion of tame and wild elements: she, a human devoted to the wilds, rejects the all-taming Aphrodite, who causes her to be 'tamed' by the eros for a bear, a wild animal who transgresses the human sphere."

But what results from the love of a woman and a bear? Many centuries later, Europe being full of stories in which bears break into houses and castles to kidnap young ladies, the bishop of Paris, Guillaume D'Auvergne would answer this question. In his *de Universo Creaturarum*, written in the middle of the thirteenth century, he states that the union between this animal and the human female is prolific, giving birth to *veri homines*, "real men," to be received in the name of Christ—distinguishable from other humans only by some bizarre marks such as a remarkable hairiness (Pastoureau 2007.102–10). Guillaume D'Auvergne, however, lived when bears were also famous as legendary fathers of kings and symbols of kingship,<sup>19</sup> and it was something much worse than real men that was born from the union of the bear and Poliphonte in our ancient story: in those huge and incredibly strong sons, arrogant toward both men and gods and, what is more, cannibals, we can identify the features transferred—strictly in the masculine lineage—from the bear father. In their names, Agrios and Oreios, we find the wild creature that waits for man in the mountain;<sup>20</sup> in their physical features and strength, we see the *immanis forma* of the big beast whose fur Trasileon once wore (Apul. *Met.* 4.18), as well as the muscular power of the bear, whose mass is visibly developed in the shoulders, chest, and back, making him a frightful wrestler and the embodiment of a brutal strength;<sup>21</sup> in their veins flows the blood of the animal that Pliny describes as the best at committing *maleficium*, "evil" (Plin. *Nat.* 8.54) and the *rabies ursina* that so impressed ancient men,<sup>22</sup> the murderous anger of the voracious beast with which Valentinianus II satisfied his own ferocity. As Petronius would say, then, *ursus homuncionem comest*, "the bear eats the little man" (Petr. 66.6)—and we recall again that the sons of the bear in Boio's story of Poliphonte were also *anthropophagi*.<sup>23</sup>

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19 See, for example, the case of the king of Denmark Sven II Estridsen, a descendant of a bear's son: Saxo Gram. 10.15; cf. Pastoureau 2007.111.

20 Cf. Chantraine 1968 s.v. ἀγρός and ὄρεος; Paus. 1.32.1 locates the bears in the Taigetos and in Arcadia's mountains.

21 Pastoureau 2007.55. Incredible strength is a typical feature of some famous bear sons such as Jean de l'Ours in his different variants; it will accompany them in their adventures when they return to human society; cf. Barakat 1965.331, Fabre 1993.11.

22 The bear's offspring will always be characterized by a remarkable fierceness; see, for example, Saxo Gram. 10.15, Pastoureau 2007.111; for the Lappish tradition, see Edsman 1956.50.

23 It's worth noting the analogies between Agrios/Oreios and the character called Orson le Sauvage, protagonist of a late *chanson de geste*. After being nursed in the Orléans' forest

Lastly, to understand the union between Poliphonte and the bear we must briefly consider the misadventures that, in certain versions of some similar myths, occurred to other virgin hunters who followed Artemis. Atalanta was nursed by a bear; she escaped men but attracted the dangerous centaurs' attentions and yielded to her passion for Hippomenes/Melanion thanks to the golden apples of Aphrodite. Both Atalanta and her husband were subsequently transformed into lions because of their impious union in a temple (Theoc. *Id.* 3.40–42, Apollod. 3.9.2, Ov. *Met.* 10.560–707). Kallisto, after having been the victim of Zeus's love, was transformed into a she-bear because of Hera's jealousy, either by Hera herself or by Zeus, who wished to keep his misdeed a secret (Ov. *Met.* 2.409–530, *Fast.* 2.155–92, Apollod. 3.8.2; cf. E. *Hel.* 375–80). These myths, and Poliphonte's story, share an important characteristic: the bear and the she-bear mark distinctly the rites of passage through which maidens become women. In addition, bears are often present when an obstinate maiden who forgets her role in society is forced by a superior power—Zeus, Aphrodite—to become a woman abruptly, succumbing abnormally to the sexuality she first despised: Atalanta, nursed by the she-bear, consummated her love in a sacred place; Kallisto raped by Zeus and then turned into a she-bear; and Poliphonte mingling with a bear and giving birth to his monstrous offspring. In such contaminations between maidens and bears,<sup>24</sup> we might see once again the final results of a sort of unsuccessful rite of passage: the monstrous examples of an unresolved transition.<sup>25</sup>

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by a she-bear, he became fierce and aggressive and used to kill any woodcutter or traveler who passed by; see Pastoureau 2007.275.

- 24 Frontisi-Ducroux 2003.154, on Kallisto's and Poliphonte's myths, talks about a possible equivalence between metamorphosis into a she-bear and sexual union with a bear. The paradigm that presents the she-bear as the result of the animal metamorphosis of a woman who rejected her own social role, and who also mates with a bear, has been noted among the Crow and Blackfoot by Comba 1996.35–39. In particular, he points out the persistence of certain tales regarding a maiden who spurned any wedding whatsoever and every day used to meet her secret lover, a bear, in the forest; one day, while playing with her sister, she imitated a she-bear but suddenly turned into a fierce beast and ended up chasing her brothers and sister.
- 25 Cf. Pellizer 1982.25–37; on these myths, cf. again Scanlon 2002.164, who comments: "The pattern in the myths of Artemis therefore describes the abandonment of the civilized, flight to the domain of the wild, followed by eventual taming, and, in some cases, reversion to or retention of the wild aspect . . . The semihuman aspects of the bear make it an ideal symbol of Artemis' function in the rituals of Attica, namely as a figure on the margin between wildness/virginity and tameness/wifeness."

At this point, one is apt to think of the Attic Brauronia, a cult in which, during archaic and classical times, maidens used to “play the bear for Artemis.” Generally, the cult is interpreted as a female initiation rite, celebrating the passage from childhood to pubescence and readiness for marriage.<sup>26</sup> Our scant ancient evidence makes it difficult to say much more (*Sud.* s.v. ἄρκτος ἢ Βραυρωνίοις, schol. Ar. *Lys.* 645; see Giuman 1999.96ff.), but it is worth noting the work of two scholars. First, Paula Perlman (1989.126–27) suggests that the maidens who celebrated their passage to adulthood by sacrificing to Artemis, with their enigmatic “doing/playing the she-bears,” might have been miming a female bear going into hibernation inside her lair as a “maiden” and then emerging again as a “mother” with her cubs.<sup>27</sup> Second, Jean-Pierre Vernant (Vernant and Frontisi-Ducroux 1991.20) refers to the story reported by both the *Suda* and the scholia to Aristophanes concerning the origin of the Brauronian cult: a wild she-bear arrived at the sanctuary of Artemis in the deme of Philaidai and was domesticated by the locals. An imprudent maiden, however, ventured to play too boldly with the animal, which either killed or injured her. Her brothers, in turn, killed the bear, bringing on Artemis’ anger. From that time on, in order to placate Artemis, no Athenian girl could marry before “having been a bear” for the goddess. What the virgins were to imitate at Brauron, Vernant suggests, is the tame bear of Artemis: exactly like the animal, they were domesticated, they became really “human”—that is, they became women who were ready for marriage. Other scholars have investigated the Brauronian rites in light of mythical narratives such as those of Kallisto or Poliphonte (cf. Dowden 1989.9–47, Giuman 1999.119–21 and 236, Marinatos 2002.36); if we consider what has been concluded so far in this essay, such a comparison would confirm the importance of the bear’s role in the context of the Brauronia: being a bear seems to equal “the transformation of the parthenos into a woman through sexuality” (Marinatos 2002.36).

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26 See, in particular, Jeanmaire 1939.258ff. and Brelich 1969.247–79, but the series of studies and materials on the topic is notoriously large. In particular, for recent discussion and exhaustive bibliography, I rely here on the important contributions of Giuman 1999, Cosi 2001, Gentili and Perusino 2002.

27 Perlman well remarks that the she-bear, image both of wildness and motherhood, is an appropriate attribute of Artemis with her twofold, contradictory faces of virgin goddess of the forest and protector of women in childbirth and of their babies. Something similar is pointed out by Bettini 1998.323–30 for the weasel: both hostile to the wedding’s world and a defender of women in labor.

However, the importance of that detail—the presence of the bear—has been downplayed by Christopher A. Faraone (2003.50) in an essay that calls into question the “initiatory” nature of the Brauronia. It seems absolutely reasonable to take into account the difficulties that he points out in associating too directly the Attic ritual and myths dealing with virgins and bears like the myth of Kallisto—or, we might add, of Poliphonte. I will, in fact, offer an interpretation that avoids these objections; to do so, I will focus on two matters. The first, technical, matter involves the inevitable difficulty of closely associating an Attic ritual celebrated during the fifth century B.C.E. with a text that does not refer directly to it.<sup>28</sup> The second, more serious, matter is that, whether we wish to privilege the interpretation of the *arkteia* as a mimesis of a she-bear’s taming or of its sexual development as a mother, what we would apparently find at Brauron in the sign of the bear is the successful conclusion of a rite after which the girl is able to occupy her place as a woman in human society. In our myth, in contrast, we have a male bear who is instrumental in the “bestialization” of a woman who failed to pass properly from maiden to mother—and all that under the unforgiving eyes of Artemis: goddess of the margin who presides over the maturation of maidens into women (Perlman 1989.120, Giuman 1999.120 and 236, Corvino 2000.284). What we have seen so far seems to be the very fulfillment of the statement according to which, whenever a virgin ventures to imitate her mistress Artemis too much, she falls into total bestiality (Vernant and Frontisi-Ducroux 1991.20).

All things considered, although comparing our myth to what we know about Brauron is interesting, possible connections are difficult to confirm and would require much more analysis than can be provided in this brief essay. Let us return, therefore, to what we can say with certainty: the story on which we are focusing here—the story of Poliphonte—makes it clear that nothing good happens to maidens who become bears’ wives. Moreover, with their almost human shape, bears remind people about the risks connected with the transformation from youth into adulthood—the dangers people can avoid if they conform to the behavioral rules of their community. For Poliphonte, a beastly wedding is just one step in the process of leaving human society, a process that will end with her final meta-

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28 Leitao 1995 was certainly safer in examining the Hellenistic initiation ritual of the Ekduisia at Phaistos, having in a myth told by Nicander and preserved in Ant. Lib. 17 direct evidence for this rite, which is explicitly recalled in the text.

morphosis into a deadly, upside-down *strix*. And with this, let us now turn to the second point of our analysis.

## 2. THE UPSIDE-DOWN *STRIX*

The unusual initial appearance of the *strix* in ancient literature gives us a glimpse of many features that are long attributed to it afterward in Latin versions of its story: in particular, we see here the *strix*'s specific characterization as feminine and maternal; her identification with a nocturnal, ill-omened creature that seems to be a bird; her involvement with cannibalism and the thirst for human blood; her binding link to semi-beastly and liminal settings upon whose margins the whole story has been built. My main purpose here, however, is to focus on the possible meanings of Antoninus's surprising description of Poliphonte hanging upside down after she has turned into a *strix*. This particular characteristic was Samuel Grant Oliphant's main evidence for concluding that the *strix* was not an owl but rather a bat (Oliphant 1913.135). Three compelling data, however, encourage us to revisit this issue:<sup>29</sup> a gloss by Hesychius, who explains the word στύξ as ὁ σκῶν τὸ ὄρνεον, "the owl, the bird" (Hsch. Schmidt s.v.); the creature's inclusion in a group of nocturnal birds of prey; and, finally, the pointedly Roman strigiform image of the *strix*—either depicted as an owl or closely assimilated to the *bubo* (see above, note 3).

If we do not intend to keep interpreting the upside-down position of this nocturnal creature from a zoological viewpoint (that is, if, unlike Oliphant, we do not insist on identifying the *strix* with a real animal that hangs upside down), then we can interpret the *strix*'s inverted position as a symbol of a particularity in Poliphonte's identity, a symbol that survives her transformation. The interpretation that Ezio Pellizer gives of this myth points to the symbolic implications of Poliphonte's metamorphosis. In his analysis, she is the maiden who wanted to back out of an orderly wedding transformed into an upside-down bird that fasts completely—in contrast with her sons, who behave like cannibals (Pellizer 1982.28–29). But we could also suppose that while Agrios and Oreios continue to be malevolent and hungry for human flesh even after they become birds of prey, Poliphonte might maintain in her bizarre upside-down position all her experience of

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29 Cf. McDonough 1997.326 note 39, who also suggests that Oliphant's identification of the *strix* with the *vespertilio*, although understandable, was probably wrong.

inverted womanhood, always on the subtle border between human and beastly. Not only, in fact, did she want to dwell outside of a human society where the role of a human woman awaited her, but her monstrous passion for a wild beast manifested itself in her production of semi-beastly offspring. In her distorted womanhood and motherhood, Poliphonte, indeed, is an inverted woman. Both in the overall story of Poliphonte, then, and, again, in the specific sign of the upside-down *strix*, a nocturnal bird of ill-omen, other girls would be able to read the symbolic antithesis of their potential futures.

But a further question involves Poliphonte's metamorphosis: why is she, an inverted woman with her disturbing femininity, transformed specifically into a *strix*? We might better understand this feature of the myth if we read it in light of Sarah Iles Johnston's studies of what she calls "child-killing demons." In the myths of monsters such as Lamia, Gello, and Mormo, Johnston sees a precise pattern: at the base of the child-killing demon there is always a story of unrealized womanhood and, more specifically, of failed motherhood. As unfulfilled women who died before realizing their "goal in life," these demons are ghosts of inverted femininity, taking revenge on those living people who are the object of their envy, usually successful mothers and their babies.<sup>30</sup> Johnston also argues that these demons, whose names were used to scare children, played a normative role, acting as concave mirrors with which to view the inverted version of the "normal" feminine model in Greek culture (Johnston 1995.365–68, 1999.169–79).<sup>31</sup> In our story, Poliphonte similarly turns into a figure that in folk beliefs is a persecutor of children and that might be placed within the category of Greek child-killing demons: the *strix* is not, in fact, famous

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30 According to Zen. *Prov.* 3.3, Gello was a virgin prematurely dead; her ghost, according to the Lesbians, persecuted children and caused them to die young; cf. Hsch. Schmidt s.v. As for Lamia, she is described in D.S. 20.41.3–5 as a beautiful Libyan queen who turned herself in a monster because of the fierceness of her heart: upset by the pain of all her children's deaths, she ordered other women's newborn babies to be snatched and slain. For this reason, her name forever frightened children. From the scholia to Aristid. Dindorf 1829.41, we know that Mormo was a Corinthian woman who ate her children and then flew away; her name was used afterwards to scare babies; cf. Theoc. *Id.* 15.40.

31 Hérítier 1997.52–54 points out something similar in relation to the Samo of Burkina Faso, whose girls traditionally get their status as adult women neither when they get married nor when they become mothers but when they conceive. Sterile women, when they die, will be buried in the children's cemetery; those women who did not menstruate while alive are thought to become restless vampires, full of blood after death, longing to take their revenge on pregnant and reproductively prolific women.

only for her desire to eat the entrails of children, causing their death by emptying the internal vitality of the victims' bodies,<sup>32</sup> but also for the perfidious habit of nursing newborn babies with her poisonous breasts.<sup>33</sup> In the image of the bad nurse, all the power of the special relationship between the *strix* and distorted womanhood is condensed. This correlation helps us to understand the upside-down *strix* of our myth: that is, she is also a sort of concave mirror in which we can see reflected and deformed the story of Poliphonte as a woman.

### 3. THE *STRIX* AND INVERSION

Some additional information can help us understand this association. In the Roman tradition, in fact, the *strix* enjoys a very special relationship with inversion in general.<sup>34</sup> Her features are a blurry combination of the nocturnal bird of prey and the *malefica* who is imagined to take the bird's form (Ov. *Fast.* 6.131ff., Petr. 63, Fest. 414.24–31 Lindsay, Ov. *Am.* 1.8.13–14). We usually call this combination, simplistically, a “witch,” and in the ancient imagination—as in the imaginations of most cultures—the witch has the ability to completely overturn nature's system: it should be enough here to cite Medea's notorious ability to upset the paths of rivers and

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32 See Pl. *Ps.* 821, who attributes to the *striges* the power of *intestina exedere*. In Ov. *Fast.* 6.137–38, the *striges* literally: “carpere dicuntur lactentia viscera rostris, / et plenum poto sanguine guttur habent,” “Are said to tear with their beaks the insides of newborn babies, and they drink their blood, filling up their throats.” At Petr. 63.8, the *strigae* seem to empty a child's corpse of its entrails, replacing them with straw; see p. 92 of this essay. At Petr. 134.1, the old hag Proselenus attributes to these creatures the power to *comedere*, “devour,” the *nervi* of Encolpius, that is, the vital, organic elements and, at the same time, the vital strength of “virility.”

33 Quint. Ser. *Lib. Med.* 57, Plin. *Nat.* 11.232. Isid. *Orig.* 12.7.42 also describes the *strix* with the term *amma*, probably a word from baby talk that means “mother, nurse”; see Ernout and Meillet 1959 s.v. Cf. Meyer-Lübke 1935.425.29, Hsch. Schmidt s.v., who explains ἄμμια just with μήτηρ· τροφός, “mother, nurse.” On the *strix* as a “bad nurse,” see Menacchi 1995.230–31.

34 On this topic, cf. McDonough 1997.320 and ff. In this article of fundamental importance for the interpretation of the Roman *strix*, the author makes exactly the same case as the above cited Sarah Iles Johnston in order to highlight the connection between the *strix* (but, more generally, the worldwide figure of the witch) and the imagery of anti-structure and inversion—this being, in particular, seen as an act of upsetting feminine and maternal nature: “It is not simply that witches exist to do evil (and thus are inversions of normal human beings), but, beyond this, witches harm children, thus conspicuously displaying their inverted natures as women.”



the order of the seasons or to confuse sun and stars (Ov. *Met.* 7.200–01), but of course Latin literature includes many other examples as well (cf. Sen. *Med.* 757–66, Prop. 4.5.9–10, Apul. *Met.* 1.8).

But the motif of inversion permeates the *strix*'s identity even more acutely. Statius describes *striges* as *monstra* (Stat. *Theb.* 3.510–11), evoking for them the aspect of the portent that upsets the natural order, and we find this feature even more clearly articulated in Petronius. The episode of the *strigae* is defined by Trimalchio as an *asinus in tegulis*, “an ass on the roof,” an abnormal and incredible phenomenon, the irrefutable sign of an inverted reality (Petr. 63.3). Her supernatural and disturbing presence alone, then, makes the *strix* herself a figure of inversion. What's more, Trimalchio frightens his listeners by telling them to remember that *strigae* are *mulieres plussciae*, “women who know more” than normal people, they are *nocturnae*, “nocturnal creatures,” and, most of all, creatures that “quod sursum est, deorsum faciunt”: creatures “that make what is down up,” that overturn something's order, exchange it, mistake it (Petr. 63.9). In the Petronian scene, moreover, the *strigae* replace the corpse of a child with a sort of straw puppet without *cor* and *intestina* (Petr. 63.8), although according to Mauritz Schuster (1930.174–78) they instead empty it of its organs and replace them with straw. We might now see either of these actions as the symbolic creation of disorder. In particular, the act of exchanging bodies is in itself a way to subvert order, found in the gruesome fancies of Roman mothers as well as in the medieval terror of so-called “changelings,” ugly and weak sons of fairies and dwarves left in place of pretty and healthy human babies (cf. Bettini 1998.299–300, Schmitt 1982.95–113).

The Roman *strix*'s ability to practice inversion seems to be one of the motifs that work as an ideal bridge between the *strix* and the ancient human sorcerer, and, indeed, between the ancient and the modern witch. The popular belief that witches can replace babies and cause disorder was still alive during the first half of the thirteenth century, since Gervase of Tilbury notes that, according to the *mos*, certain creatures still called *striae* enter houses during their nocturnal flights, turn on lamps that are turned off, mix up skeletons' bones, and move babies from the places where their mothers left them sleeping—only to be found hours later lying outside the house's locked door (Gerv. Tilb. *Otia Imp.* 3.85–86). Even in the 1950s in the countryside of Tuscany, people told stories about mothers finding their babies outside closed windows or tumbled off the bed every night because of the *streghe*, “witches” (cf. Bonomo 1985.452). The belief in these kinds of displacements and exchanges was also used by Luigi Pirandello for his

novella *Il figlio cambiato*, edited in 1925. In this story, some nocturnal “witches of the air,” called Le Donne, “The Women,” stole the beautiful son of a woman, leaving her their presumably ugly and sick baby on the floor lying in the opposite direction (Pirandello 1987.496–501). Pirandello wrote more precisely in a letter to Marta Abba dated 1930 that throughout southern Italy there was a popular belief according to which during winter nights some witches called The Women used to travel via the air and enter houses through either chimneys or dormer windows; once there, these creatures stole babies from their mothers, plaited their hair, or touched the babies’ closed eyes so that, in the morning, they woke up with crossed eyes—or they played the horrible trick of trading a mother’s healthy, beautiful baby for a sick and ugly one (Pirandello 1995.429–30).

In stories spread over different times and places, the *strix* in particular and the witch in general are unquestionably figures of inversion inasmuch as they symbolically represent or physically practice an overturning of order and nature. This portrait is to some extent supported by Fritz Graf’s analysis of the Roman view of the magician, which he presents in his study of magic in the ancient world. Graf (2003.61–88) discusses the manner in which Roman society applies the identity of “wizard” to marginal figures who, through certain behaviors, put in motion a succession of events that, for a citizen with full rights, risk inverting society’s structures. This characterization falls, of course, within the general rule theorized by Marcel Mauss (1973.24), according to which, notoriously, the individuals to whom the practice of magic is attributed already have a distinct social position (generally marginal or abnormal) that causes them to be treated as wizards.

#### 4. SOME CONCLUSIONS

At this point, let me summarize my argument. Through the link between the *strix* and the motif of inverted womanhood/motherhood, and through the special relationship between this creature and the realities of inversion and disorder, we are better able to understand the cultural meaning of the bizarre upside-down position of Poliphonte once she has turned into a *strix*, and possibly also better understand the symbolic link between the woman Poliphonte and this special bird—a creature of inversion, a murderous nurse, a child-killing demon—whose upside-down position in this myth reflects very well the entire inversion of the femininity of its human alter ego: the girl who once spurned Aphrodite and became nothing but a

bear's wife. A wrong move made by our unfortunate maiden entangled her in a sexual partnership with the beastly double of a man and forced her into a life marked by the degradation of the normal feminine development that she had rejected. Poliphonte's wild, mountain "marriage" made her a degenerate woman and, what's more, a degenerate mother. The inverted creature that Poliphonte becomes represents once and for all how perilous the transition to womanhood might be. Behind the virgin who mingled with a bear and became an upside-down *strix* we are able to see the outline of the witch's disturbing femininity and inverted maternity. Lastly, we also glimpse some of the cultural meanings of the inversions spread throughout both the ancient sources about *striges/strigae* and the more recent beliefs about witches. With their lust for blood, their nocturnal flights, their rapacious incursions among babies' cradles, and also in their special power of putting the right things in the wrong place, witches continue to be represented as those ancient upside-down *striges*, so terrifying because—as Trimalchio knew well—"quod sursum est, deorsum faciunt."

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