

## 1 The Roman *Strix*: Terminology and Texts

### 1.1 The *Strix* Introduced

This *libellus* seeks to provide the tricky answer to an ostensibly simple question: What was a *strix*? Provisionally, let us say that she was a creature of the folklore of the Roman world and subsequently that of the Latin West and that of the Greek East. She was a woman that flew by night, either in a form akin to that of an owl or in the form of a projected soul, in order to penetrate homes by surreptitious means and thereby to devour, maim, blight or steal the new-born babies within them. The modern stereotype of the vampire is a reasonably close analogue.<sup>1</sup>

After a consideration of the Latin term, this section lays out the three most substantial accounts of the *strix* to survive – those in which she is explicitly so designated, at least – namely those of Ovid, Petronius and John Damascene.<sup>2</sup> This prepares the way for Section 2, the study's engine room. Here we analyse the recurring and constituent motifs of the *strix*'s *modus operandi* found in the three key texts and also, typically by way of passing allusions, in a substantial collection of further sources. From this we are able to reconstruct the ideal narrative of a *strix* attack – 'the *strix*-paradigm' – and it is this that enables us to offer a more complete and final answer to our fundamental question of what a *strix* was. Section 3 proceeds to demonstrate the profound impact of the *strix*-paradigm on the general representation of witches in the Latin literary tradition.<sup>3</sup> Section 4 looks at the *strix* in the context of a *longue durée* that starts with the child-killing demons of ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Greece and finishes with Gello, an active figure in modern Greek folklore as recently as the

<sup>1</sup> Recent work on *striges* has been dominated by the publications by Cherubini, most notably her monograph, 2010a (though much of the length is occupied with expansive excursuses on harpies, bears, the evil eye and theatrical masks), and 2010b (effectively a précis of the same in English); note also her 2009a and 2009b. Oliphant's pair of articles, 1913 and 1914, constitute the fundamental collation of the evidence. The material is discussed with some insight by McDonough 1997 and Spaeth 2010 (the latter focusing on the 'night hag'). Scobie 1978 provides wide-ranging folkloric comparanda (for which cf. also his 1983: 21–30 and Lawson 1910: 179–84). Beyond these items, see Boehm 1931, Curletto 1987, esp. 150–6, Gordon 1999: 204–10 (on the 'night-witch'), Touati 2003 (*non vidi*), Björklund 2017a, Hutton 2017: 67–72 ('the night-demoness').

<sup>2</sup> I do not touch here upon the focal argument developed in Ogden 2021, namely that, in addition to owls, *striges* may have had a secondary propensity to transform themselves into wolves – but I do begin my exposition here in the same way as I do there, by laying out the three key texts first, this being the clearest way to proceed.

<sup>3</sup> The semantic field of the term 'witch' includes the Latin literary creations discussed in Section 3 (which played their part in the English concept's development). The key term in Latin (by no means always expressed) is *venefica*; we shall encounter some of its synonyms, *saga*, *maga*, *cantatrix*.

turn of the twentieth century AD. This arms the pressing question as to whether there was specifically a Greek *strix* prior to the Latin one, or whether the Greek world effectively appropriated the Roman one. The Conclusion briefly addresses two further questions: Why did the *strix* matter to the ancients? And why does she matter to us?

All the major Classical and medieval sources for the *strix* are incorporated in translation.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 Terminology

The term *strix* signifies, in its simplest usage, a variety of owl. This is conventionally identified as the screech owl, for reasons that will become apparent, though some regard the term as indeterminate for species.<sup>5</sup> Often, however, and more pertinently to this study, it signifies a woman that flies by night to attack babies: sometimes she is imagined to take on the physical form of the owl, or a form with affinities to it, to accomplish this, but this was not always the case. The term appears in both Greek and Latin linguistic traditions in a dizzying range of variant forms. We cannot determine which of the two languages it originated in, nor, concomitantly, can we identify a secure etymology for it. We shall defer discussion of the Greek side to Section 4, but Table 1 offers the first attestations of the forms in which the word is found in the Latin tradition.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 1** *Strix* terms in Latin: first attestations

Singular	Plural	Date of first attestation	Source of first attestation
<i>strīx</i>	<i>strīges/strīges</i>	191 BC	Plautus <i>Pseudolus</i> 819–23
<i>strīga</i>	<i>strīgae</i>	c. AD 66	Petronius <i>Satyricon</i> 63
<i>styx</i>	* <i>stygēs</i>	later ii AD	Hyginus <i>Fabulae</i> 28.4
<i>stria</i>	<i>striae</i>	AD 507–11	<i>Pactus legis Salicae</i> 64.3, <i>MGH</i> Leges nat. Germ. iv.1 p. 231

Note: A preceding asterisk (\*) denotes a form that is not actually attested.

<sup>4</sup> Translations coinciding with my ancient-magic sourcebook (Ogden 2009) are taken over from it, with slight alterations.

<sup>5</sup> Cherubini 2009b: 77–8, 2010a: 21–5, 2010b: 65, 73–4 n.3 holds that the term was of broad usage and could designate any kind of owl, whilst contending that Ovid’s description best suits a barn owl.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. LS and *OLD* s.vv.

The term is first attested in the third-declension form *strīx* in Plautus' comedy *Pseudolus*, composed c. 200 BC, where it is associated with the devouring of human innards, and therefore refers to the woman as opposed to the simple bird. Petronius, who died in AD 66, deploys this same form in his novel, the *Satyricon*, but also a parallel first-declension form, *strīga*, this in a narrative given to the freedman Trimalchio (of which more anon). In both cases the word is applied to women again. Why the variation in form? Petronius works hard to characterise, indeed over-characterise, the language his uneducated, nouveau-riche freedmen speak, and so in placing the term *strīga* as he does in Trimalchio's mouth, he is telling us that this variant is déclassé – 'vulgar Latin', in both the informal and the formal senses. And, indeed, this *strīx*–*strīga* relationship crisply illustrates the broader tendency of Vulgar Latin to simplify third-declension nouns into first- or second-declension ones, which were more regular and predictable in terms of both grammar and gender.<sup>7</sup> As in many cases, vulgar terms represented the future of a language. In the Salic Law of AD 507–11, where once again the reference is to women, we accordingly find an evolved version of the *strīga* form, *stria* (the length of the *i* is unclear), which Gervase of Tilbury would later (AD 1209–14) classify as 'French'.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, one can imagine that the form *stria* may even have been in use already in Classical times, this under the influence of a similar word-group innocuously signifying 'furrow': *strīx* (Vitruvius), *strīga* (Columella) and *strīa* (Varro). Ultimately, *strīga* evolved into the modern Italian *strega* ('witch'), a word familiar beyond Italy's borders for its use as the name of a mild herbal liqueur, its label suitably decorated with a broom-stick-toting figure.<sup>9</sup>

The form *styx* is probably erroneous. It is printed in editions of Hyginus' (later ii AD) *Fabulae*, including Marshall's Teubner version, where it seemingly denotes a pure bird, a distinctly sinister one that sits atop the column to which Otus and Ephialtes are forever bound, with snakes, in the underworld.<sup>10</sup> Hesychius specifies that the parallel Greek form signifies a little horned owl (*skōps*).<sup>11</sup> But what did Hyginus actually write? All editions of the *Fabulae* depend on the (inaccurate) first printed version of it made by Jacob Micyllus in 1535, after which the sole manuscript with which he worked was destroyed. By

<sup>7</sup> See above all Boyce 1991, esp. 49; for the language of Petronius' freedmen see also Blänsdorf 1990, Gaide 1995; for the term *striga* specifically see Ernout and Meillet 1959 s.v. *striga*, Väänänen 1967: 189–190, 232, Cherubini 2009a: 143, 2010a: 35, 2010b: 73 n.1. The ii AD grammarian Flavius Caper was still attempting to hold back the tide of vulgarity: *striges non strigae* (at Keil 1855–1923: vii.111, line 11).

<sup>8</sup> Gervase of Tilbury *Otia imperialia* 3.86.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Oliphant 1913: 135, Cherubini 2009a: 143 n.2, 2010a: 14–16. <sup>10</sup> Hyginus *Fabulae* 28.

<sup>11</sup> Hesychius s.v. στῶξ; however, there are complications with the Greek form in turn: see Section 4.3.

chance, two fragments of this manuscript, written in Benevantan script and dating to *c.* AD 900, have subsequently been discovered reused in book bindings, and are preserved in Munich. One of them contains the relevant portion of text, and we can now see that the scribe had originally written ‘*stri*’ before correcting it to ‘*stys*’. It seems likely that the prior manuscript our *c.* AD 900 scribe had evidently struggled to decipher had read *strix*, and that the form *styx* did not, accordingly, exist in the Latin tradition.<sup>12</sup>

With *styx* cut from consideration, we may note that all variants of our term are first attested in the ‘woman’ sense as opposed to the ‘pure-bird’ sense.

### 1.3 Ovid’s *Fasti*

Our starting-point in reconstructing the world of the *strix* must be a trio of paragraph-length texts all of which in their different ways offer rich and broadly synoptic accounts of the *strix* and her activities. Collectively, they permit us to reconstruct a basic paradigm for the phenomenon, as we proceed to do in the following section. Two of these are Latin texts from the Rome of the early empire, a passage from Ovid’s *Fasti* and a passage from Petronius’ *Satyricon*. The third is a Byzantine Greek passage of uncertain date and provenance, but which evidently draws ultimately on similar traditions. As we lay the passages out, we shall tag the tight set of related motifs emerging from them, in preparation for the analytical discussion that follows in Section 2.

The Augustan poet Ovid left his *Fasti* or *Calendar* unfinished when exiled by Augustus in AD 8. A didactic poem in elegiac couplets, it explains the origins of the Roman festivals and their associated customs. The 1<sup>st</sup> of June is sacred to the goddess Carna.<sup>13</sup> On this day sacrifices are offered to her in the grove of Alermus beside the Tiber. Ovid tells us that she had once been the nymph Cranae, a maiden-huntress in the style of Artemis-Diana. She had had a clever technique for maintaining her virginity. Whenever pressed by a suitor, she would invite him to lead the way to a discreet cave where they could make love, only to disappear into the bushes once his back was turned. The technique failed, however, when she caught Janus’ eye, for the looking-both-ways god could of course see what happened behind him with the second face on the back of his head. In compensation for her defloration, he transformed her into Carna, the patron goddess of the door-hinge (*cardo*), and gave her the whitethorn or buckthorn as her sacred plant. With this she could defend doorways from supernatural attacks.<sup>14</sup> She was first called upon to use them to protect the little boy Proca, the future Alban king:

<sup>12</sup> See Marshall 2002: v–xiv, 43 (*ap. crit.*). <sup>13</sup> Ovid *Fasti* 6.101–30.

<sup>14</sup> The ancient hinge consisted of a pole running vertically down the side of the door, which rotated in sockets in the floor beneath and the lintel above.

*The Strix-Witch*

5

[C] There are some rapacious birds. These are not the ones that cheated Phineus' mouth of his table [i.e., the Harpies], but they derive their descent from them. They have a large head, their eyes stand proud, their beaks are suited to snatching. There is greyness in their wings and there are hooks on their talons. [B] They fly by night [J] and seek out children without a nurse. [G] They snatch their bodies from their cradles and mar them. [H] They are said to tear apart the innards of suckling babies with their beaks, [I] and their throats are engorged with the blood they have drunk. [E] They are called *striges*; the reason for the name is that they are accustomed to screech [*stridere*] in dreadful fashion [B] during the night. Whether, then, these creatures are born in avian form, [A] or they are created by means of a spell, and a Marsian dirge transmutes old women into birds, [F] they came into Proca's bedchamber. The boy had been born just five days before, and now he was a fresh prey for them. [I] They sucked out his infant breast with eager tongues. The unfortunate child wailed and called for help. Alarmed at the cry of her charge, his nurse ran to him. She found that his cheeks had been gored by hard talons. What could she do? The colour of his face was that one sometimes finds in late leaves that have been damaged by the new frost. [N] She went to Carna and told her all. Carna said, 'There is no need to be frightened: your charge will be safe.' She came to the cradle. His mother and his father were weeping. 'Hold back your tears: I myself will heal him', she said. [F] At once she touched the doorposts, thrice over, with an arbutus branch, and three times she marked the threshold with her arbutus branch. She sprinkled the doorway with water (the water contained an infusion) [H] and she held the uncooked entrails of a two-month old sow [*porca*]. This is what she said: 'Birds of the night, spare the child's innards; for a small boy a small victim is sacrificed. I pray, take this heart for his heart, these liver-lobes for his liver-lobes. We give you this life to preserve a better one.'<sup>15</sup> When she had made her offering, she laid out the parts she had cut in the open air and forbade those attending the rite to look back at them. [F] A rod of Janus, taken from a whitethorn bush, was put where the small window allowed light into the bedchamber. It is said that after that the birds no longer invaded the cradle, and the boy's former colour returned to him. Ovid *Fasti* 6.131–68<sup>16</sup>

It seems that the poet has confounded here the goddess Carna, whose province was in fact, suitably enough, the protection of flesh (*caro, carnis*), with another goddess, Cardea, whose province was indeed the protection of the hinge (*cardo*).<sup>17</sup> In glossing Ovid, the V AD antiquarian Macrobius affirms that the goddess Carna's province had consisted of internal organs such as livers and hearts.<sup>18</sup> But the

<sup>15</sup> I.e., a *porca* is given in substitution for *Proca*: see McDonough 1997: 333, Spaeth 2010: 243–4.

<sup>16</sup> For exegesis of this passage see Oliphant 1913: 140–3, Frazer 1929: iv, 141–4, Bömer 1958–63: ii, 344–5, Scobie 1978: 76, Littlewood 2006: 45–51, Cherubini 2010a: 25–34, 2010b: 66–7.

<sup>17</sup> See Frazer 1929: iv, 141–2.

<sup>18</sup> Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.12.32; however, it may be that he had no other source than Ovid upon which to rely, as McDonough 1997: 328–30 notes. See also Pettazzoni 1940: 164, and Cherubini 2010b: 67.

conflation, whether originating with Ovid or otherwise, is probably a deliberate and knowing one, given that the goddess that defends against *striges* must protect both bodily organs – flesh – and doorways alike.

### 1.4 Petronius' *Satyricon*

Petronius Arbiter left behind his once massive comic novel, the *Satyricon*, when executed by Nero, c. AD 66.<sup>19</sup> The main surviving portion of the work describes an outrageously tasteless dinner party hosted by the nouveau-riche freedman Trimalchio, and in the course of this a pair of lurid stories are exchanged between the host and his fellow freedman Niceros. Niceros begins by telling a werewolf story (of which more anon) and Trimalchio responds to it with the following tale:

[N] I myself will tell you a tale to make you shudder: an ass upon the roof-tiles. When I still had my hair long (for from being a boy I led a life of 'Chian' luxury), our master's favourite boy died. He was a pearl, and delightful in every respect. While his pitiful mother was mourning over him, and many of us were feeling miserable about it, [E] the *strigae* suddenly started to screech [*stridere*].<sup>20</sup> You would have thought it was a dog chasing a hare. We had at that time a Cappadocian slave, tall, quite daring, and strong. [F] He boldly drew his sword and ran out of the door, carefully binding up his left hand to use as a shield. He ran one of the women through, in the middle, round about here – gods preserve the part of my body I indicate. [D] We heard a groan, but – honestly, I won't lie – we did not actually see them. Our great hulk of a man returned within and threw himself down on the bed. [H] His whole body was black and blue, as if he'd been beaten with whips (this was obviously because an evil hand [*mala manus*] had touched him). [F] We shut the door and returned to what we were doing, but, when the mother embraced the body of her son, as she touched it she realized that it was just a tiny thing made of straw. [H] It had no heart or guts, nothing. [D, G] You see, the *strigae* had stolen the boy and left a straw doll in his place. I beg you to believe it.<sup>21</sup> [A] Women that know something more [*plussciae*] do exist, [B] night-women [*nocturnae*] do exist, and what is up, they can make down.<sup>22</sup> But that hulking man never properly recovered his colour after this adventure, and indeed he went mad and died a few days later. Petronius *Satyricon* 63<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Rose 1971 articulates the standard approach to the problems of the work's date and authorship.

<sup>20</sup> The manuscript is corrupt at this point; this key term has – very plausibly – been restored by editors.

<sup>21</sup> See Section 2.4 for the justification of the identification of Motif D here.

<sup>22</sup> A reference in the first instance, perhaps, to the propensity of ancient witches to draw down the moon, as, e.g., at Horace *Epodes* 5.46, Lucan *Pharsalia* 6.500–6 and Petronius *Satyricon* 134; cf. Hill 1973.

<sup>23</sup> For exegesis of this passage see Cherubini 2010a: 34–41, Schmeling 2011: 260–4.

Although nothing is said of it, it is possible that we are to imagine that the women have been responsible for the boy's death in the first place.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.5 A Byzantine Fragment: John Damascene?

The seemingly long-lived John of Damascus (*c.* AD 650–*c.* AD 750) was an Arab Christian and the author over thirty philosophical and polemical works, largely compilatory in style. It is his misfortune that the work for which he is best known, the romance *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, was written by somebody else. Similarly transmitted as his, but not necessarily by his hand, is a homiletic fragment classified under the title *De draconibus et stryibus*, 'On dragons and striges'.<sup>25</sup> There seems to be no particular bond between the treatments of the two topics, and it may be that the text comprises two separate fragments rather than one. It has been contended that the material bearing upon dragons at any rate was written by the ninth-century AD Kekaumenos, author of the *Stratēgikon*.<sup>26</sup> However, the material on *striges*, whenever it was penned and whatever its age and provenance, seemingly has deep and ancient roots, given the degree of the integration of its motifs with the two passages laid out so far, as well as with the other ancient texts we shall consider in the following two sections. It reads as follows:

I don't want you to be ignorant about this. [N] Some less well-educated people say that there are women called *stryngai* and also *geloudes*. [B, D] They say that they appear through the air by night. [F] Arriving at a house, they find no hindrance in doors and bolts, but get in even when doors have been securely locked, and smother the children. [H] Others say that they devour their liver [I] and all their moisture [K] and impose a time-limit on their lives. Some insist that they have seen them, [D, E] others that they have heard them. [F] Somehow, they enter houses, even though the doors have been locked, together with their body, [D] or just by means of their bare soul. And I will declare that only Christ, Jesus Christ our God, was able to do this. After he rose again from the dead, he entered through locked doors to meet his holy apostles. [A] But if a woman mage did this, and does it, then the Lord no longer did anything amazing with the locked doors. [D] If they were to say that she enters the house just as a bare soul, with her body resting on a bed, then hear what I have to say, which is what our Lord Jesus Christ said: 'I have the power to lay down my soul, and I have the power in myself to take it up

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the XV AD evidence (from Kieckhefer 1998) adduced in Sections 2.17 and 3.1, where *strix*-like witches are said to penetrate houses magically in order to blight and kill the children within and then, in a second action, retrieve their bodies after burial for consumption or magical exploitation.

<sup>25</sup> It is branded as 'dubious' in Geerard's *Clavis patrum Graecorum: CPG* 8087, Fragmenta 1 and 2.

<sup>26</sup> Litavrin 2003: 636–43.

again.<sup>27</sup> And he did this once on the occasion of his holy passion. [A] But if a disgusting woman mage can do this whenever she wishes, then the Lord did nothing more than what she does. [H] And if she has devoured the child's liver, how is he able to live? [N] All this is nonsense talked by some heretics opposed to the one and holy Church, with a view to diverting some people of the simpler sort from orthodoxy.

John Damascene *On Dragons and Witches*, PG 94,1604<sup>28</sup>

Any doubts that the ideas enshrined in this rather later text belong closely with those of the Ovid and Petronius texts should be assuaged by the end of Section 3.

## 2 The Motif-Set and Paradigm

In this, the pivotal section, we analyse the overlapping network of motifs associated with the *striges* in the (predominantly) Latin tradition of the ancient and medieval eras, and reconstruct an ideal narrative of a *strix* attack. This project is rendered feasible by the fundamental coherence, consistency and conservatism of *strix* lore throughout, and it is upon this enduring core of belief that we focus our attention, rather than attempting to pursue the particularities of the handlings of *strix* imagery in individual authors, or nuanced shifts in the significance of the *strix* as she passed from one age to another or from the context of one broader belief-system to that of another.

### 2.1 Motif A: The *Strix* as an (Old) Witch

That the *striges* are conceptualised as witches is explicit in Ovid's text, where it is said that – by one hypothesis – old women transform themselves into the aviform creatures in question by means of a spell or a 'Marsian dirge'. Here 'Marsian' is a metonymy for 'magical'. The Romans ever associated the Marsi of Marruvium, on the shore of Lake Fucinus, with magic, and in particular with the charming and bursting open of snakes.<sup>29</sup> The Romans typically conceptualised witches in general – as we still do – as old women: Horace's Canidia ('Grey One') wears false teeth, whereas her companion Sagana ('Wise One') sports a wig;<sup>30</sup> when Apuleius' Meroe complains that her former lover Socrates has mocked her youthful innocence, it is with no little irony<sup>31</sup> (these figures will be considered in more detail later: 3.1, 3.5).

The classification of the *striges* as witches is more or less explicit in Petronius' text too, where the story narrated is presented in affirmation of the

<sup>27</sup> John 10:18. <sup>28</sup> Translation taken over from Ogden 2018.

<sup>29</sup> See Letta 1972, esp. 139–45, Tupet 1976: 187–98, Dench 1995: 159–66.

<sup>30</sup> Horace *Satires* 1.8.48–50. <sup>31</sup> Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 1.12.

truth that ‘Women that know something more do exist.’ The term ‘knowing something more’, *plus-sciae*, is suggestive both of the esoteric knowledge of witchcraft and also of age and experience.<sup>32</sup>

John Damascene’s Greek text designates its *strix* by the slightly paradoxical phrase ‘woman mage’ (*magos . . . gynē*), a ‘mage’ being inherently male. It is curious that this phrase should be used in place of the standard Greek term for ‘witch’, *pharmakis*, which originally described a female manipulator of herbs or spells, *pharmaka*.<sup>33</sup> The same designation is also found in a fable of Aesop’s preserved in a Byzantine collection, where a ‘woman mage’ (*gynē magos*), who has claimed to be able to placate the anger of the gods, is condemned for religious innovation and taken off for execution.<sup>34</sup> As often with the Aesopic fables, it is difficult to know how old this tale actually is, but it must post-date the turn of the fourth century BC at any rate. Religious innovation was famously one of the two crimes that led to Socrates’ execution in 399 BC.<sup>35</sup> But the fable may even belong in its entirety to the Byzantine age, to which, indeed, the phrase ‘woman mage’ may be confined. Perhaps the phrase originated in an attempt to forge an equivalent to the appropriately feminised Latin term *maga*, first attested in one of the younger Seneca’s plays (before AD 65), where it is applied to women making love potions; it is subsequently applied by Augustine to Circe as she transforms Odysseus’ companions into pigs in his AD 426 *City of God*.<sup>36</sup>

A bilingual glossary, the *Glossary of Philoxenus*, preserved solely in a IX AD manuscript, offers the following Greek gloss on the Latin form *striga*: ‘a Laestrygonian, and a witch woman [*gynē pharmakis*]’.<sup>37</sup>

## 2.2 Motif B: Operating by Night

For Ovid the *striges* ‘fly by night and seek out children without a nurse’. John Damascene observes that ‘They say that they appear through the air by night.’ But it is Petronius’ text that is the most valuable here. His Trimalchio does not initially identify the time at which the action of his tale takes place, but, when he draws his conclusion, he presents his tale as an affirmation of the truth not only that ‘women that know something more do exist’ but also that ‘night-women

<sup>32</sup> *Plus-sciae*, as a single word, would be a *hapax*; see Schmeling 2011 *ad loc.* and Cherubini 2010a: 167–8 n.168 for justification of it; but perhaps we should read, more simply, *plus sciae* (‘knowledgeable in respect of more’).

<sup>33</sup> For ancient herbal magic see now Watson 2019: 116–47.

<sup>34</sup> Aesop *Fables* 56 Perry. The tale is preserved in the XVI AD manuscript (codex Laurentianus 57.30) of a fable-collection made by the later XIII AD Maximus Planudes.

<sup>35</sup> Plato *Apology* 24b–c. <sup>36</sup> Seneca *Hercules Oetaeus* 523; Augustine *City of God* 18.17.

<sup>37</sup> *Glossary of Philoxenus* s.v. *striga*; for the text see Laistner 1926. The glossary is partly derivative of Festus. We shall discuss the significance of ‘Laestrygonian’ in Section 4.

[*nocturnae*] do exist'. We infer, accordingly, that it is not merely the case that *striges* contingently tend to operate by night; rather, night-time activity lies at the heart of their identity.

Further references to the *strix* as a nocturnal creature abound, although in most cases they seem to refer to the pure owl in the first instance, which, obviously, was nocturnal in its own right.<sup>38</sup> One more text is worthy of particular mention, however: the ii AD medical poet Quintus Serenus Sammonicus speaks of a 'black' *strix* attacking boys with her 'fetid dugs' (the full text is quoted in Section 2.10). I take the adjective 'black' here to be a transferred epithet saluting the night-time circumstances in which she works.<sup>39</sup>

### 2.3 Motif C: Flying and Bird Transformation

The *strix* flies by night to do her work – but how? There are two rather distinct models. According to the first, the *strix* transforms herself into an owl or an owl-like entity to make her attack, as we shall discuss in this section. According to the second, she projects her soul from her body to do her work for her, invisibly, but somehow tangibly, as we shall discuss in Section 2.4.

It seems unlikely that the creature responsible for the child-attacking phenomenon with which we are concerned was ever conceived of as the simple bird tout court. Rather, the child-attacking *strix* always seems to have been conceived of as a woman first, a woman capable of transforming herself into a bird, or a woman with avian elements or abilities, not least the ability to fly. There is no explicit reference to birds at all – except insofar as it might be considered inherent in the word *strix* itself – in our key passages of Petronius and John Damascene, for whom the creatures are clearly first and foremost women. In a fragment of (the i BC) Verrius preserved by (the later ii AD) Festus *striges* are again apparently understood first and foremost as 'flying women', albeit the protective Greek charm he then quotes seems in itself to speak only of pure birds:

<sup>38</sup> At Horace *Epodes* 5.15–24 (c. 30 BC) the horrid witch Canidia uses 'a feather of the nocturnal *strix*' alongside other unpleasant ingredients in a love potion. At Lucan *Pharsalia* 6.689 (AD 65) the disturbing blend of animal noises the super-witch Erichtho produces as part of her spell to retrieve a dead soul from the underworld and compel it to reanimate its parent corpse include 'the complaints of the eagle-owl [*bubo*], the complaints of the nocturnal *strix*'. An ill omen at Statius' *Thebaid* 3.511 (c. AD 91) includes 'nocturnal *striges*'. The Damigeron-Evax *Lapidary*, a v–vi AD Latin adaptation of a lost Hellenistic Greek original, prescribes the manufacture of an amulet against *nyktalōpes*, literally, 'creatures that see by night', and then glosses the term with the phrase, 'which is to say, against nocturnal birds [*nocturnae aves*], i.e., *striges* or tawny owls [*cavanae*]' (28.1); Halleux and Schamp 1985: 266–7 and Cherubini 2009b: 80 n.8, 2010a: 158 n.62 contend that this phrase of explanation is a late interpolation. Isidore of Seville *Etymologies* 12.7.42 (early vii AD) refers briefly to 'the *strix*, the nocturnal bird'.

<sup>39</sup> Quintus Serenus Sammonicus *Liber medicinalis* 58, ll. 1029–38.