

Article

Notes on the Nature of Beliefs in Witchcraft: Folklore and Classical Culture in Fifteenth Century Mendicant Traditions

Fabrizio Conti

Department of History and Humanities, John Cabot University, 00165 Rome, Italy; faconti@johncabot.edu

Received: 11 August 2019; Accepted: 12 October 2019; Published: 15 October 2019



Abstract: Witchcraft is a varied historical phenomenon with changing sociocultural aspects according to the times and the places considered. Nonetheless, it is possible to trace the different cultural substrata giving shape to witch-beliefs in order to shed light on their process of amalgamation. The aim of this study is to show how the folkloric and the Classical literary motives were intertwined in the fifteenth century by figures lauded as the high intellectuals of the time, Franciscan and Dominican preachers and inquisitors, to produce a coherent and multifaceted picture of witchcraft-related beliefs. By putting some of the most significant sources that I have analyzed in my monograph *Witchcraft, Superstition, and Observant Franciscan Preachers* in relation to others that I have not considered before composed by the same or different authors, my aim is to show how this process of combination of various cultural traditions gave shape to the creation and the understanding of the witchcraft phenomenon. Furthermore, I also intend to highlight how the at times contradictory views concerning witch-beliefs, pointing either to realistic or to skeptical stances, are related to specific declensions of those different traditions on the part of the friars.

Keywords: witchcraft; Franciscan and Dominican friars; magic; folklore; classical culture; religious history

Witchcraft is a multifaceted cultural phenomenon with its nature, causes, and outcomes bound to a high degree of variation and fluidity according to the geographical and the chronological boundaries considered.¹ The origin and the peculiar cultural substrata shaping witch-beliefs can, however, be reconstructed in detail to shed light on their intellectual formative processes. My aim here is to show how two of the main cultural substrata behind the construction of witch-beliefs, the folkloric and the Classical literary motives, were intertwined in the fifteenth century by Mendicant preachers and inquisitors to produce a coherent and multifaceted picture of witchcraft-related beliefs. By relating some of the most meaningful sources that I have analyzed in my monograph *Witchcraft, Superstition, and Observant Franciscan Preachers* (2015) to others that I have not analyzed before, my aim is twofold. I aim to show how this process of amalgamation of various cultural traditions gave shape to the creation and the understanding of the witchcraft phenomenon, and to highlight how the at times contradictory views concerning witch-beliefs pointing either to realistic or to skeptical stances, are associated with specific declensions of those different traditions on the part of the friars. In other words, I shall show how and with what purpose the texts of the friars recall and reuse both folkloric and classical traditions in dealing with witch-beliefs.²

¹ Cf. (Kieckhefer 2013, 2006; Barry and Davies 2007; Briggs 1996).

² See (Conti 2015).

The myth of witchcraft is not a standalone phenomenon, one disconnected from a wider, and at the same time, specific context. Through their assessment of people's level of adherence to Christian faith, according to the rules of Scholastic theological models, the Mendicant friars collected and elaborated on elements that would become a constitutive part of beliefs in witchcraft. In this regard, those friars often dealt with witch-beliefs as part of their concerns over superstition—this latter being the domain opposing official Christian religious practices—as well as in the context of pastoral care, as I have shown in the case of fifteenth-century Milanese Franciscan friars³ The teachings of the confessor as well as those of the preacher show how the world of superstition is vast. As the renowned Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola (d. 1498) shows in his *Eruditorium confessorum*, a handbook for the instruction of confessors, superstition opposes religion, and it includes specific categories of practitioners of witchcraft among those dealing with other classes of magic:

The sinner has to be interrogated about the superstitious cult, which acts against religion. [...] The idolaters, necromancers, evil doers (*malefici*), sorceresses (*mulieres incantatrices*), and whoever else exhibit cult to the devil, they all sin against that [religion] in a very serious way [...]. And similarly [sin] the enchanters, diviners, and those who say to be able to find stolen objects through various superstitions as well as those who wear amulet scrolls hanged on their neck [...].⁴

Malefici and *mulieres incantatrices* certainly belong within the domain of witchcraft. While the term *maleficus* can be employed in a general way to indicate the one who conducts evil, in his *Libellus* against magicians the Dominican Isidoro Isolani (d. 1528) includes witches (*strigae*) as part of the *malefici* category.⁵ The women who practice sorcery (*mulieres incantatrices*) offer the category of superstition an even more precise orientation towards witch-beliefs, leading to the construction of the stereotype of the witch practitioner typically being female. Within this context, folklore and classical culture emerged as the two primary domains from which the constitutive elements of beliefs in witchcraft will be taken and assembled.

In the record of superstitions that is part of the *Sermones discipuli de tempore* published in 1418 by the German Dominican preacher Johannes Herolt (d. 1468), known as the *Discipulus*, the friar gives an interesting account of beliefs seemingly referring to pre-Christian folkloric traditions. In particular, in his Sermon 41 for the second Sunday of Lent titled “On the twenty-four types of men who falsify faith,” Herolt enlists a number of beliefs and behaviors in opposition to the Christian faith, twenty-one of which are considered to be superstitions.⁶ Some of these elements concern the domain of divination, such as casting lots, the one of enchantment, such as casting spells, or that of magic, such as putting together love potions. Other elements pertain to superstitious attitudes called *vanae observationes* that Herolt, as all the other friars, generally consider with leniency, including observing dreams or observing the course of the moon and the sun. Other beliefs, on the contrary, are of much greater concern for the friar. Above all, the *vetulae* or old women who can make a woman sterile or provide advice on how to get rid of a fetus, as well as those women who enchant people and beasts, fall under the suspicion of showing a diabolic attitude endangering life in all its forms.

It had been most notably the belief in the train of the goddess Diana and the host of the dead as related by Herolt to catch the interest of scholars. The German friar develops a rather different version of the well-known witchcraft mythology centered on the *ludus Dianae* or the “Game of Diana,” which

³ On the weight of tradition and the role of superstition for the development of witchcraft cf.: (Bailey 2013); for the Milanese case see: (Conti 2011, pp. 62–91; Conti 2016, pp. 201–13).

⁴ Interrogandus est etiam peccator de superstitioso cultu qui est contra religionem. [...] Peccant etiam contra hoc gravissime idolatre, necromantici, et malefici, et mulieres incantatrices et quicumque alii qui exhibentes cultum diabolo [...]. Et ideo incantatores, et divinatores, et qui dicunt se invenire furta per varias superstitiones, et portantes brevia ad collum [...]: (Savonarola 1510) f. [E Vr].

⁵ (Isolani 1506). Cf.: (Conti 2015, pp. 225–26).

⁶ (Herolt 1497) Sermon 41, fols hi^{vb}–hiiii^{ra}.

relates to the tenth century canon *Episcopi*. Through its successive redactions by Regino of Prüm's *De ecclesiasticis disciplinis* of 906, Burchard of Worm's *Decretum*, and later on, Gratian's *Decretum*, the canon *Episcopi*, mistakenly believed as issued at the Council of Ancyra of 314, pointed to those deluded women who believe they go about at night in the train with the goddess Diana (or with Herodias according to other redactions) on the backs of animals:

It is also not to be omitted that some wicked women, who have given themselves back to Satan and been seduced by the illusions and phantasms of demons, believe and profess that, in the hours of night, they ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of the pagans, and an innumerable multitude of women, and in the silence of the night traverse great spaces of earth, and obey her commands as of their lady, and are summoned to her service on certain nights. [. . .] Such phantasms are imposed on the minds of infidels not by the divine but by the malignant spirit.⁷

Herolt connects this mythology to the world of the dead, as opposed to the original text of *Episcopi*. This separates his text from the several other authors who elaborate on the same myth without making such an association.⁸ The Dominican preacher writes:

The nineteenth [in this list] are those who believe that Diana goes about at night with her army through great distances. Similarly, some at night prepare the table and uncover the vessels so that the souls of the dead should fill them and bring them every fortune.⁹

The term army (*exercitus*) employed by the German preacher while pointing to belief in the night train of Diana travelling through the space of many lands, refers to the “furious horde” of the dead, thus apparently merging the myth of Diana with that of the army of the dead of Germanic origin. This was later connected to Unholda, the demonized and witch-like version of the goddess Holda, originally linked to the idea of bounty. The positive, original belief connected to this mythology is proven by the fact that, as Herolt writes, at night some people prepare tables and leave the pots open so that the souls of the deceased that are part of the army of Diana can fill them and make the households rich. The core of this belief rests on the idea of bounty and fortune brought about by those ghostly entities to the houses they visit, constituting an interesting opening towards the vast and foggy land of folkloric or popular beliefs.

As it is known, belief in supernatural travelers of female appearance and good inclination, visiting houses at night and being known as *bonae res* or “good things,” enjoys a rather rich written tradition in medieval literature. Both William of Auvergne's (d. 1249) *dominae nocturnae* travelling in the train of a female figure whom he calls Lady Abundia and Satia, and the Dame Abonde of the late thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose* show a clear link with the idea of prosperity. Stephen of Bourbon (d. 1261) as well as Vincent of Beauvais (d. 1264) link the “good women” to Diana (and Herodias) and the *mulieres* of the canon *Episcopi*, thus highlighting the interconnections between folkloric and literary domains. Such “good ladies,” potentially dangerous entities themselves, had more harmful counterparts in the vast array of sorcerers roaming around with them such as the *estries* mentioned in the *Roman de la Rose*, and especially those evil nightly entities known as *striges* or *lamiae* which can shapeshift and murder children.

⁷ Illud etiam non est omittendum, quod quaedam sceleratae mulieres retro post satanam conuersae, daemonum illusionibus et phantasmatibus seductae, credunt se et profitentur nocturnis horis cum Diana paganorum dea et innumera multitudine mulierum equitare super quasdam bestias, et multa terrarum spacia intempestae noctis silentio pertransire, eiusque iussionibus uelut dominae obedire, et certis noctibus ad eius servicium euocari. [. . .] non a diuino sed a maligno spiritu talia phantasmata mentibus infidelium irrogari: (Regino of Prüm 1880); for the English translation of the Canon see: (Kors and Peters 2001, pp. 61–63).

⁸ See: (Ginzburg 1991, pp. 101–3).

⁹ Deciminoni sunt qui credunt quod Diana cum exercitu suo de nocte ambulet per multa spatia. Item aliqui de nocte preparant mensam et vasa discoperiunt ut manes debeant illa replere et ipsis hominibus fortunium prebere: Herolt, *Sermones discipuli*, Sermon 41, fol. hiiii^{ra}. See: (Conti 2015, p. 265).

These latter beliefs are about entities coming from the Greco-Roman tradition. *Lamiae* were modeled on the Lamia of the Greek mythology, the beautiful Lybian princess and former mistress of Zeus, who would later become a monster murdering young children. This is paralleled in near-eastern Lilith, their counterpart in the recurrent ancestral fear of child-killing demons.¹⁰

The Sicilian *donni di fuori* or the “ladies from outside” studied by Gustav Henningsen, represent the example of “good women” who mediated between the world of the humans and that of the fairies. These testify to the proximity to a mythology centered on joyful, dancing, and festive processions of fairies bringing food and prosperity to the houses they visit. That of the *donni* is a specific case of folkloric taste, having nothing to do with diabolic witchcraft, notwithstanding the attempt of the Spanish inquisition to merge the two traditions into one single pattern, just as it would happen with the Benandanti studied by Carlo Ginzburg.¹¹ We cannot detect any diabolical traits in the accounts of the gatherings of the Sicilian *ladies* and in their entering the houses at night, as one woman joining them declared: “When they went into the houses it was like a wind, and they opened the chests and dressed themselves up in the clothes they found, and they played the tambourine and the lute and sang very sweetly.”¹²

It is in the interpretative efforts of the inquisition as well as in the texts of the preachers that the evolution from a mythology connected to joy and bounty can be seen taking up its diabolical connotation. This is often characterized by the idea of an inversion of Christian faith. Often the stance of the authors concerning these beliefs can vary within the context of belief in the *ludus Dianae*, from which the stereotype of the witches’ Sabbath emerged.

The *exemplum* of the young girl from Ivrea told by the Milanese Observant Franciscan friar Bernardino Busti plays a particularly meaningful role in this context. According to the preacher, a young woman was convinced by a *vetula*, a wicked old lady, to join her at the Game of Diana (*ludus Dianae*). According to the folklore, this was a joyful event and closely linked to the history and mythology prevalent in the community. In her case, however, there is a condition. As the friar highlights, in order to take part in the *game* the girl is required to renounce her Christian faith:

A certain girl was often urged by a diabolical little old lady to go with her to the Game of Diana, after she had once said to her that she had never seen nor experienced such delights, and at last agreed to go. When the old lady told her that in order to participate in those sights and pleasures she would have to renounce the Christian faith, baptism and all the sacraments of the Church, she did all that.¹³

The friar goes on telling how the two women, the young girl and the diabolical old lady, went to a “wonderful hall covered with silk and filled with pleasant fragrances” where they engaged in joyful dances in the company of handsome young men dressed in golden and silver clothing. This went on until disgusted by the behavior of the *vetula*, the girl uttered the name of Jesus, and the entire *ludus* suddenly disappeared, leaving the young woman alone, right in the same place where she was before embarking on the experience, as she afterwards told to her confessor. As I have shown in my book, along with the new, diabolical connotation of the *ludus Dianae*, a development in the intellectual stance of the Milanese Franciscan friars about the nature of these beliefs takes place with an approach steadily leading to skepticism about their reality. That follows a line already expressed by Johannes Nider’s (d. 1438) well-known *exemplum* concerning the *vetula dementata* (deluded old little woman)

¹⁰ See: (Diodorus 2000, pp. 237–85); (Diodorus 2002, pp. 251–55); Cf.: (Montesano 2018, pp. 30 ff., 110–21; Paule 2018, pp. 65–74).

¹¹ (Henningsen 2001, pp. 191–215; Ginzburg 1992).

¹² (Henningsen 2001, p. 199)

¹³ Quedam iuvenis sepius incitata a quadam vetula diabolica ut ad ludum Diane secum pergeret, cum ei semel inter alia diceret quod numquam talia solatia viderat nec habuerat, tandem consensit. Cumque illi vetula diceret quod talibus spectaculis et consolationibus interesse non poterat nisi fidei christiane et baptismo atque omnibus sacramentis ecclesie renunciaret, illa omnia fecit: (Busti 1498, Sermon 16, fol. 129^{rbva}). Text in (Conti 2015, pp. 273–74).

who accepted to demonstrate her ability to be carried through the air on a night ride with Diana to a Dominican friar. While the woman experienced she was flying, the friar, however, could just see her falling asleep in the bowl where she had sat after having rubbed herself with some ointments and apparently having convulsions during her self-induced “demonic dreams.”¹⁴

Along this line, those who visit the houses at night are not always described as fairies, but are accused of being evil women, specifically *vetulae*, according to a growing stereotypical association of witches with old women. These are women who can turn into other species, especially cats (shapeshifting being a feature that these evil beings share with the harmless fairies) in order to better penetrate into houses, which they can enter even through closed doors, to bring harm to babies placidly sleeping in their cradles. Still with a skeptical stance, the Observant Franciscan Antonio da Vercelli describes this belief discharging the women from perpetrating those actions, and granting sole responsibility onto the devil: “As what is seen under the shape of a cat is simply the devil himself, whom in the shape of an old woman or a cat kidnaps and murders babies in the cradle.”¹⁵ In order to discharge the accused women from the accusations, Antonio agrees that even in the case that something concrete happens, it is not due to the action of the woman allegedly involved but due to the devil.

Antonio elaborates further on the problem of the reality of this witch-belief by denying that the wounds one might detect on the bodies of a *vetula* should be considered the result of a physical altercation between the parents and the *vetula* and therefore the proof that she was a witch visiting homes at night:

On whether the blow truly leaves traces on the body of the little old lady, or in other words, whether such a wound is really imprinted on her, I say that this can happen in three ways. First, in a natural way, due to fact that the old woman may have injured herself by falling; second, this can happen due to strong imagination, as a punishment for her sins, as she believes of being part of the followers of Herodias or Diana, and to go about fascinating babies [so that] such wounds can be found on her as all this imagination makes her to fall; third, as the devil himself can injure the woman, with the permission of God, to punish her for her sins, and from all this she is convinced of being beaten or of killing the babies. To this you can add, if you want, a forth possibility: since the devil can deceive the eyesight of several people by making the little old lady seem that she was beaten, while she was not.¹⁶

The only real element, according to the preacher, is the illusion and that is the reason for the wounds one can find on the bodies of those *vetulae* erroneously considered to be witches. There are three possible causes for the wounds detected on the women as Antonio states: the first is the most common and it rests on the possibility that the women could have simply fallen during the day. The second can be the power of the imagination of the *vetula* concerning the reality of her travels along with Diana or Herodias, an imagination that can generate real falls. The last is a supernatural type of possibility, when with the permission of God the devil harms the old, wicked woman to punish her for her sins and she becomes convinced of having been beaten or performing her murderous acts on the babies. Here Antonio seems to elaborate further on an issue already addressed by Bernardino da Siena, when he points out that “the devil makes it seem to that evil woman that she shapeshift into a cat and go

¹⁴ See: (Chène 1999, pp. 134–36). Cf.: (Klaniczay 2008, pp. 63–64).

¹⁵ Illud quod videtur in forma gatte simpliciter est ipse demon in specie vetularum vel musipularum pueros de cunabulis et lecto rapiens et occidens: (Antonio da Vercelli 1492, Sermon 45, fol. 329^{vab}). Text in (Conti 2015, p. 279).

¹⁶ Quod autem realiter in persona vetule percussio facta remaneat, seu tale vulnus vetule imprimatur, dico quod hoc triplici respectu euenire potest. Primo naturaliter, ex casu ut puta dum cadendo tale vulnus recepisset. Secundo, hoc potest accidere ex vehementi ymaginatione in penam peccati, quia dum talis vetula ex comitibus se fore credit Herodiadis vel Diane, et credit se in ymaginatione esse ad rapiendum pueros, tale vulnus in ea factum remanet pro eo quod vehemens ymaginatio plerumque facit casum suum. Tertio, dicas quod permittente Deo in penam peccati diabolus sibi tale vulnus infligit ex quo ipsa credit se esse ad actum illius percussiois seu occisionis pueri. Adde si vis et quartum responsum quia plerumque diabolus potest deludere oculos videntium, ut talis vetula videatur percussa, cum tamen percussa non sit: (Antonio da Vercelli 1492, Sermon 45, fol. 329^{vab}).

around bewitching. However, she remains in her bed. These are illusions of the devil to deceive people!”¹⁷ According to Bernardino, it is just the devil who wants to deceive people, to make it seem to the woman that she shapeshifted into a cat and went around bewitching. All while the truth is that she remains in her bed. The power of imagination, one might say.

Friars decry the belief in metamorphosis or the ability of humans to shapeshift into different species, as a diabolic illusion. To prove this point, Roberto da Lecce refers to examples of humans transformed into animals by magical or divine tricks in Classical myth and literature, primarily through the *auctoritas* of Augustine of Hippo, whose skeptical stance Roberto adopts to sustain his own view on this matter. Thus, the transformation of the companions of the Thracian hero Diomedes into birds “in the fashion of big geese” (“a modo de grosse oche”), that of Ulysses’ companions into beasts by the “beautiful, evil, and lecherous” (“bella, malefica, e meretrice”) Circe, and Lucius transformed into an ass by the mistake of the witch’s servant Fotis in Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, are all cases that, according to Roberto, participate in making belief in shapeshifting unrealistic, if not ridiculous.¹⁸

The belief - of folkloric taste - concerning the night visits of fairies into the homes not only had a completely harmless scope but also a positive one in bringing prosperity, joy, and fun to the babies living in the house. Such a belief eventually shifted into the one in old women changing shape in order to better sneak into the houses and murder the babies sleeping in their rooms. This is a shift from prosperity to its negation, and from life to death: that was the true sense of any witchcraft for those communities. The interesting point besides the evident shift in the meaning and the interpretation of these beliefs seems to be the skeptical view developed in the writings of those friars. There are, of course, discordant voices about this in the coeval sources and different approaches were always possible. The case of the condemnation by such an inquisitor as the Dominican Heinrich Kramer of “those dangerous and unlearned preachers” (“periculosi et indocti praedicatores”), as he calls them, who were apparently trying to relieve accusations against alleged witches based on their skeptical stance, is one important sign of the tense coexistence of different views concerning witch-beliefs among friars.¹⁹

Thus, the Franciscan preacher Roberto da Lecce tells, with a witty spirit, an anecdote describing how one of those *vetulae* even gets to the point of making fun of the belief in her own travelling at night and to gain something for herself out of such credulity:

In a certain town there was a dog-faced old woman, who used to go to the course [with the goddess Diana], and some women who had their husbands afar went to her, whose name was lady Simia, asking her one by one of their husbands. The old woman replied to them: “I will go to the course tonight, and I shall tell you tomorrow morning what I know, but bring to me a nice, fat Paduan crow”, and that foolish woman brought that to her. The dog-faced old woman ate that all, and at times those women also brought her some good wine, so that, eating and drinking so well, she also slept well at night, waking up when the sun was already high. Thus, while the women were waiting to receive an answer, the depraved and malicious dog-faced woman, told them the first thing she had in mind, and sometimes she guessed it right, while other times she did not, in this way still eating the crow.²⁰

¹⁷ El dimonio fa parere a quella mala femmina ch’ella diventi gatta e vada stregando, ma ella si sta nel letto suo. Lusioni di dimonio per ingannare altrui! See: (Bernardino da Siena 1934, p. 169).

¹⁸ (Roberto da Lecce 1517, fol. 18^{ra}). Cf.: (Augustine of Hippo 1955, pp. 47–48).

¹⁹ (Kramer 1496, pp. 285–86, fols Iii^{vb}–Iiii^{ra}). Cf.: (Conti 2015, pp. 285–86).

²⁰ Erat in quadam civitate una vetula rechagnata, que pergebat in cursu, et domine, que maritos procul habebant, ad eam proficiscebantur, vocabaturque domina Simia, ac ei dicebant, videlicet nunc una, modo altera velle scire quid viri sit. At illa: ‘Me ac nocte in cursum oportet accedere, sciam in mane tibi dicere, sed feras mihi unam bonam gracillam magnam pinguem paduanam’. Illa pazarella eam ferebat. Vetulla [sic] vero rechagnata totam edebat, et aliquando ei optimum vinum ferebant, et ipsa, que bene ederat et biberat, etiam in nocte bene dormiebat, adeo quod, quando se excitabat, sol altus erat. Demum ille eam expectabant ut ab ea aliquod responsum haberent, sed rechagnata, viciosa, seu maliciosa eis responsum dabat secundum quod per prius cogitaverat, et aliquando verum divinabat et aliquando non, et hoc pacto gracillas edebat: (Roberto da Lecce 1983, p. 210).

Simia, the “dog-faced” old woman, is thus said to go to the night train with Diana and certain women want to exploit her travels for the sake of knowing about their husbands who are far from home. In an exchange, the *vetula* asks for a fat, good jackdaw to eat. The women keeps providing Simia with food and wine so, full and happy after eating and drinking, the *vetula* sleeps during the night and wakes well into the day. In order to comply with her pact with the women, the old lady gives them different answers sometimes guessing right, and sometimes not. Roberto da Lecce treats this as a good and comical way to represent the nonsense of the belief in the witches’ night train while at the same time showing his own attitude, not at all concerned about these beliefs, which he is working hard to delegitimize. We need to imagine the effect those short tales were intended to have on the audience during the preaching event, that of changing the beliefs and behaviors of the laity.

Through this, however, we are left to wonder: who could be considered a witch? This is a fundamental question for us as it was for the friars dealing with witch-beliefs within their communities. It was while the friars characterized the evil nature of the old woman or the *vetula* that they merged disparate traditions into the definition of such a character. For sure, there is not a simple and univocal path towards the characterization of the witch. These stereotypes and beliefs are interwoven much as the threads of a knitting. What we see is a process of amalgamation of different traditions, to which sometimes-diverging stances correspond.

The idea of evil, monstrous beings of female nature attempting at life, and especially at the life of babies, arrived to the study table of the fifteenth century friar from an old tradition rooted in Roman and Greek literature and mythology.²¹ As has been pointed out, the Roman literary tradition offers a varied characterization of what we would consider a witch, also pointing to her by different terminology, such as *docta*, *divina*, *maga*, *saga*, *venefica*, *malefica*, *lamia*, or by the simple periphrasis *quaedam anus* (some old woman), so close to the by then common *quedam vetula*, which we have already discussed. Central to the characterization of the witch is, however, the *strix* (pl. *striges*).²² The *strix* is a type of night bird, generally considered a screech owl, although this association only happened in modern times as Marina Montesano has pointed out. It was originally not considered an animal belonging to the natural world, but rather a monstrous creature of human (feminine)-bird appearance. The elegiac couplets of Ovid’s *Fasti* give a popular description of these mysterious beings:

These are insatiable birds, not the harpies that deprived
 Phineas of his feasts, although it is from them that they descend:
 Their heads are large, their eyes unblinking, their beaks made for hunting;
 Their wings are white, their talons hooked,
 At night they fly and seek out children separated from their nurses
 To snatch them from their cradles and rend their bodies;
 They are said to tear out children’s milky entrails with their beaks
 And fill their gullets with the blood they have drunk.
 There is a name for those birds—*striges*—so called
 Because of their strident shrieking in the night.
 Whether therefore they are born birds, or are made such by enchantment
 And are nothing but women transformed into fowls by a Marsian spell.²³

²¹ On this: (Montesano 2018, pp. 11–66).

²² (Paule 2018, pp. 8–9, 67–72).

²³ Sunt avidae volucres, non quae Phineia mensis | guttura fraudabant, sed genus inde trahunt: | grande caput, stantes oculi, rostra apta rapinis; | canities pennis, unguibus hamus inest; | nocte volant puerosque petunt nutricis egentes, | et vitiant cunis corpora rapta suis; | carpere dicuntur lactentia viscera rostris, | et plenum poto sanguine guttur habent. | est illis strigibus nomen; sed nominis huius | causa quod horrenda stridere nocte solent. | Sive igitur nascuntur aves, seu carmine fiunt |

“These are insatiable birds,” Ovid says, and although not the same as the harpies that tormented the Thracian seer Phineus by stealing his food—as told in Apollonius’ *Argonautica* (2, 178–499)—they still descend in some ways from the harpies. The physical description of the *striges* does not bear a resemblance to the mythological appearance of the harpies, but reminds the reader of owls or birds of ill-omen mentioned by other Roman poets, with their large heads, unblinking eyes, beaks made for hunting, whitish wings, and hooked claws. Some other features of the *striges* will later become a constitutive part of witch-beliefs: they fly in the night, attack babies in their cradles, especially those lacking the care of a nurse (*nutricis egentis*), and their throats are full of the blood they have drunk. They are called *striges*, Ovid points out, because of the strident shrieks they emit in the night.²⁴ The Roman poet does not provide indications on whether these creatures were old women changed into birds by Marsian spells or whether they were just born as birds. A possible answer to this issue, in the direction of asserting that these women were shapeshifters, can be found in Petronius’ *Satyricon*, through the words of Trimalchio, when speaking of the *striges* (*strigae* in this text) he says that they are wise women and night-riders (“sunt mulieres plussciae, sunt Nocturnae”).²⁵

Other popular figures of apparent witches in Latin literature, this time of human nature, and specifically “old women” (*anus*) such as Horace’s Canidia and Lucan’s Erichtho, share with the *striges* (and with the *lamiae*) most of their traits, especially their basic failure as mothers, the murdering and dismembering of children, magic rituals, and the association with the night. These characters also add elements or skills that will later join the other features in describing proper figures of witches. First are skills related to the ability of preparing potions and poisons, which will characterize such women as *veneficae* or poisoners.²⁶ A figure of old woman that played a role in the subsequent medieval elaboration of the stereotype of the witch as a *vetula* is represented by Dipsas, both a bawd and a witch, of which Ovid gives an elaborate description in his *Amores*. Dipsas is never sober and has some supernatural and evil predispositions: she knows how to use herbs, she can make clouds gather in the sky or make the face of the Moon become blood-red, in the shadows of night she can presumably (*suspicio*, says Ovid) shapeshift with her old woman’s body growing feathers, and she can summon ghosts as well as do harm by her tongue. These are all traits that for the most part become a steady presence in the characterization of the witches as *vetulae*.²⁷

Trial records testify to the presence of the above mentioned elements well into the fifteenth century among the charges against women accused of being witches, such as the well-known case of Matteuccia of Todi, labeled a “woman of bad repute” and a witch, tried and condemned in 1428.²⁸ The records attest to the alleged ability of Matteuccia to shapeshift into a cat (not an owl), which by then had already begun to represent the clear sign of the association of the woman with the devil. Above all, she was accused of entering houses under that guise and to attack children in their cradles by sucking their blood. The attacks against children offer some detail:

Furthermore, in that, around that, and above that, not satisfied with the aforementioned, in the month of May 1422 on a Thursday, she went to the village of Rotelle, in the district of Orvieto, for bewitching, and there she entered the house of a certain Mecarello, finding one of his daughters asleep in a cradle next to the bed of her father, and she beat and sucked [the blood of] that girl as she usually does.²⁹

neniaque in volucres Marsa figurat anus: (Ovid 1989, pp. 131–42). English translations are available in (Paule 2018, p. 67; Montesano 2018, p. 55).

²⁴ Cf. (Paule 2018, p. 67; Montesano 2018, pp. 55 ff). For an analysis of Ovid’s text, see: (Littlewood 2006, pp. 45–47).

²⁵ (Petronius 1925, pp. 9, 63). Cf.: (Montesano 2018, pp. 58–59).

²⁶ (Montesano 1999, p. 104 ff.; Montesano 2018, p. 44 ff.; Paule 2018, pp. 74–79).

²⁷ (Ovid 1914, 1.8.) Cf. (Cokayne 2003, p. 146; Cardini 1979, p. 37).

²⁸ (Mammoli 1983, p. 14).

²⁹ Item in eo, de eo et super eo, quod predictis non contenta, in M°cccc°xxij° de mense maij in die jouis, accessit stregatum | ad villam Rotelle, comitatus Urbeueteris et ibi ingressa fuit domum cuiusdam Mecharelli de dicto loco in qua in- | uenit

That phrase, “as she usually does” (“prout ipsa solita est facere”), carries its own significance outside of the contents of the present study and so will not be expanded upon.³⁰ Matteuccia is also said to prepare potions and spells, as well as ointments with the fat of vultures and the blood of babies and owls in order to fly during the night. Her destination was named as the walnut tree of Benevento, where the witches were traditionally believed to congregate.

Similar accusations were leveled against other witches of the area of central Italy. Such was the other well-known case of Finicella, a woman convicted of being a witch who was burnt at the stake in Rome once Bernardino da Siena had preached in the *urbs* in 1426. Bernardino tells his audience about Finicella during one of the sermons he is delivering in Siena the following year: “Do you know what was done in Rome while I preached there? [. . .] I want to tell you what was done in Rome.” Thus, he explains how while he was preaching in Rome “About these enchantments and witches and spells, what I said seemed to them as if I was dreaming,” but then the power of the words of the preacher spurs people to denounce, so that, Bernardino continues, “When I finished preaching, a multitude of witches (*streghe*) and enchanterers were accused.” Finicella appears, named, with the customary anti-witchcraft charge in the tale of the preacher while he says of the several witches who were arrested after his sermon: “One among the others [Finicella] said and confessed without any torture that she had killed thirty children by sucking their blood.”³¹ Finicella’s being prone to infanticide by sucking the blood of children seems to connect well to centuries old stereotypes of which the Roman literary traits characterizing *striges* seem to be more than an echo.

Although recognizing the reality of the misdeeds of Finicella, as we saw, Bernardino expresses his skepticism about other elements of the rising witchcraft-mythology, such as, especially, shapeshifting. Interestingly, as I have shown, with the later fifteenth-century generation of the Observant Franciscan friars a clearer line of skepticism was elaborated directly targeting belief in witches that are called *strege*, this latter being a term that clearly recalls the figures of monsters of Roman literature with the charges traditionally associated with them. Thus, while writing of superstitious observances, Michele Carcano, a Milanese Observant Franciscan, points out that:

As to the observance of illusions, there is the observance of certain women who are misled and deceived and say that they go riding at night with Diana or Herodias, and that they transform themselves into other creatures that are popularly called *strege*. This is strongly opposed by the Council of Aquileia (through) 56, q. 5 of the canon *Episcopi*.³²

The reality of the *strege*, which are the ancient *striges*, is questioned on the basis of the skeptical view expressed by the tenth century canon *Episcopi*. However, originally that text did not refer to these witches, but only to “certain women who are misled and deceived and say that they go riding at night with Diana or Herodias, and that they transform themselves into other creatures.”³³ The recent witches, modelled on the ancient *striges* of the Roman tradition, enter the domain of the women travelling at night along with Diana, in turn, most probably referring to the *bonae res* or the fairies of medieval tradition. It was as if the negative stereotypes related to the diabolic power of certain women—the *strege/striges*—had been surviving across the ages and through the folklore as well as in literary and canonical texts, until they became part of a more recent blend of stereotypes that gave shape to what we can properly call witchcraft. In this way, some of the friars try to oppose the reality of some of these

quandam filiam dicti Mecharelli dormientem in quadam culla existente prope lectum dicti Mecharelli | et ipsam suam filiam percussit ac sucauit prout ipsa solita est facere: (Mammoli 1983, p. 34).

³⁰ On bloodsucking, see: (Kieckhefer 1998, pp. 91–109).

³¹ (Bernardino da Siena 1989, vol. ii, pp. 1007–8). See (Ginzburg 1991, pp. 297–98; Mormando 1999, pp. 52–59).

³² De observatione illusionum qua observatione quedam mulieres decipiuntur et illuduntur que asserunt se cum Diana vel Herodiade nocturno tempore equitare, et se in alias creaturas transformare, que ideo vulgariter dicuntur *strege*. Nam huiusmodi valde detestantur per Concilium Aquilianum 56 q. 5 c. *Episcopi*: (Carcano 1492, Sermon 23, fol. 60^{va}). See: (Conti 2015, pp. 256–57).

³³ (Kors and Peters 2001, p. 62).

recent witch-beliefs by employing a text—the canon *Episcopi*—that had condemned belief in (or of) certain women about their night travels.

As the case of Finicella shows, the friars did not question the existence of evil women, or *maleficae*, willing to “cursing life” by killing children and willing to operate evil.³⁴ What is questioned is the mythology centered on such a type of monster as the *strega*, which although rooted in the Classical tradition, enjoyed a connection with characterizing elements, such as night flight, shapeshifting, and participation in the Sabbaths. This eventually merged folkloric roots and Classical literary stereotypes, giving shape to something new.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Antonio da Vercelli. 1492. *Sermones Quadragesimales de XII Mirabilibus Christiane Fidei Excellentiss.* Venice: Giovanni e Gregorio de Gregori.
- Augustine of Hippo. 1955. *De Civitate Dei*, 18, 16–18. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina; 2 vols. Edited by Bernhard Dombart and Alfons Kalb. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Bailey, Michael. 2013. *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe*. Ithaca: London: Cornell University Press.
- Barry, Jonathan, and Owen Davies, eds. 2007. *Witchcraft Historiography*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bernardino da Siena. 1934. *Le prediche volgari: Quaresimale fiorentino del 1424*. 2 vols. Edited by Ciro Cannarozzi. Pistoia: Pacinotti, vol. 2.
- Bernardino da Siena. 1989. *Prediche volgari sul Campo di Siena 1427*. 2 vols. Edited by Carlo Delcorno. Milan: Rusconi.
- Briggs, Robin. 1996. Many Reasons Why: Witchcraft and the Problem of Multiple Explanation. In *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief*. Edited by Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 49–63.
- Busti, Bernardino. 1498. *Rosarium Sermonum*. Venice: Giorgio Arrivabene.
- Carcano, Michele. 1492. *Sermones Quadragesimales de Decem Preceptis*. Venice: Giovanni e Gregorio de Gregori.
- Cardini, Franco. 1979. *Magia, Stregoneria, Superstizioni Nell'Occidente Medievale*. Florence: La Nuova Italia.
- Chène, Catherine. 1999. 'Jean Nider, Formicarius' [II.4]. In *L'imaginaire du sabbat: Edition critique des textes les plus anciens (1430 c.–1440 c.)*. Edited by Martine Ostorero, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani and Kathrin Utz Tremp. Lausanne: Cahiers Lausannois d'Histoire Médiévale.
- Cokayne, Karen. 2003. *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome*. London: Routledge.
- Conti, Fabrizio. 2011. Preachers and Confessors against 'Superstitions'. Bernardino Busti and Sermon 16 of his Rosarium Sermonum. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 6: 62–91. [CrossRef]
- Conti, Fabrizio. 2015. *Witchcraft, Superstition, and Observant Franciscan Preachers: Pastoral Approach and Intellectual Debate in Renaissance Milan*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Conti, Fabrizio. 2016. Grids for Confessing Sins. Notes on Instruments for Pastoral Care in Late Medieval Milan. In *Religious Orders and Religion Identity Formation, ca. 1420–1620: Discourses and Strategies of Observance and Pastoral Engagement*. Edited by Bert Roest and Johanneke Uphoff. Leiden: Brill.
- Diodorus, Siculus. 2000. *The Library of History II*. Reprint. Translated by Charles Henry Oldfather. Book 3, 49–61. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Diodorus, Siculus. 2002. *The Library of History X*. Reprint. Translated by Russel M. Geer. Book 20, 41. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. 1991. *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. 1992. *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Translated by John Tedeschi, and Anne Tedeschi. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

³⁴ (Conti 2015, pp. 221–46).

- Henningsen, Gustav. 2001. The Ladies from Outside: An Archaic Pattern of the Witches Sabbath. In *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*. Reprint. Edited by Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Herolt, Johannes. 1497. *Sermones Discipuli de Tempore et de Sanctis*. Lyon: Jean de Vingle, Sermon 41.
- Isolani, Isidoro. 1506. *Libellus Aduersus Magos, Diuinatores, Maleficos*. Milan: Giovanni Angelo Scinzenzeler.
- Kieckhefer, Richard. 1998. Venging the Blood of Children: Anxiety over Child Victims and the Origins of the European Witch Trials. In *The Devil, Heresy, and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey B. Russell*. Edited by Alberto Ferreiro. Leiden: Brill, pp. 91–109.
- Kieckhefer, Richard. 2006. Mythologies of Witchcraft in the Fifteenth Century. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1: 79–108. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Kieckhefer, Richard. 2013. The First Wave of Trials for Diabolical Witchcraft. In *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*. Edited by Brian P. Levack. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 159–78.
- Klaniczay, Gábor. 2008. Learned Systems and Popular Narratives of Vision and Bewitchment. In *Demons, Spirits, Witches, 3: Witchcraft Mythologies and Persecutions*. Edited by Gábor Klaniczay and Éva Pócs. Budapest: CEU Press, pp. 50–82.
- Kors, Alan Charles, and Edward Peters, eds. 2001. *Witchcraft in Europe, 400–1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kramer, Heinrich. 1496. *Tractatus Varii Cum Sermonibus Plurimis. Secunda Pars*. Nürnberg: Anton Koberger.
- Littlewood, R. Joy. 2006. *A Commentary on Ovid: Fasti Book 6*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mammoli, Domenico, ed. 1983. *Processo alla strega Matteuccia di Francesco 20 Marzo 1428*. Todi: Res Tudertinae.
- Montesano, Marina. 1999. “Supra Acqua et Supra ad Vento”. “Superstizioni, maleficia e incantamenta nei predicatori Francescani Osservanti (Italia, sec. XV)”. Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo.
- Montesano, Marina. 2018. *Classical Culture and Witchcraft in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mormando, Franco. 1999. *The Preacher’s Demons: Bernardino of Siena and the Social Underworld of Early Renaissance Italy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ovid. 1914. *Amores*. In *Heroides. Amores*. Translated by Grant Showerman. Revised by George Patrick Goold. Loeb Classical Library 41. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Ovid. 1989. *Fasti*. Reprint. Translated by James George Frazer. Cambridge: London: Harvard University Press.
- Paule, Maxwell Teitel. 2018. *Canidia, Rome’s First Witch*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Petronius, Seneca. 1925. *Satyricon, Apolocyntosis*. Translated by William Henry Denham Rouse, and M. A. Litt. Cambridge: London: Harvard University Press.
- Regino of Prüm. 1880. *De Ecclesiasticis Disciplinis et Religione Christiana Libri Duo, II*. PL 132. Edited by J. P. Migne. Paris: Garnier Fratres.
- Roberto da Lecce. 1517. *Spechio de la Fede Vulgare*. Venice: Piero de Quarengis Bergomascho.
- Roberto da Lecce. 1983. *Quaresimale Padovano 1455*. Edited by Oriana Visani. Padova: Messaggero.
- Savonarola, Girolamo. 1510. *Eruditorium Confessorum*. Paris: Parvus.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).