ORPHEUS AS OWL AND STAG: OVID *MET.* 11.24–27

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IN HIS ROUGH OUTLINE of the Ovidian narrative of Orpheus' death at the hands of the Thracian women, Franz Bömer (on *Met.* 11.6) astutely discerns a triple function in the double simile at *Met.* 11.24–27: 1) retardation and 2) intensification ("erster Höhepunkt") of the narrative; 3) preparation for the ensuing attacks by the raving women.[1] Yet exactly how the two similes perform these functions deserves to be explored more fully. A close reading of the passage reveals a pair of brief simple comparisons operating in context as a remarkable narrative fulcrum that is even more complex than Bömer or other commentators suggest. Such a demonstration may also help to vindicate Ovid from any lingering charges of mere mannerism or "redundancy"[2] in his use of multiple similes.

At the start of Book 11, the rebuffed women of Thrace, while engaged in Bacchic celebrations on a hill top, catch sight of Orpheus charming the natural world with his songs. They attack him, at first unsuccessfully. A thyrsus thrown by one woman strikes without wounding. Orpheus' music forces a stone cast by another to fall before his feet. The frustrated women's frenzy grows, and their own Bacchic cacophony—the usual shrill music and ululations—eventually neutralizes his musical defences by drowning him out. Their stones now finally strike the singer. They set upon the spellbound animals in attendance upon the *vates*. Then, in the center of the passage (11.1–43), the women turn their now bloody hands against Orpheus himself (11.23–28):

> *inde cruentatis vertuntur in Orphea dextris*
> *et coeunt, ut aves, si quando luce vagantem*
> *noctis avem cernunt, structoque utrimque theatro*
> *ceu matutina cervus periturus harena*
> *praeda canum est; vatemque petunt et fronde virentes*
> *coniciunt thyrsos non haec in munera factos.*[3]

Ovid marks the beginning of the end with similes, whose suspension of the narrative here, as elsewhere,[4] heightens the tension at a crucial moment. He freezes the onrushing action at the moment when the women "gather"

[1] F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen. Buch X–XI* (Heidelberg 1980) 241.

[2] S. G. Owen, "Ovid's Use of the Simile," *CR* 45 (1931) 97–106, at 105.

[3] I follow W. S. Anderson's text (Leipzig 1977), which rightly marks a strong stop at the end of the similes (see below, n. 19).

[4] T. F. Brunner, "The Function of the Simile in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *CJ* 61 (1966) 354–363, at 358; M. von Albrecht, "Zur Funktion der Gleichnisse in Ovids

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or "flock together" (*coeunt*). Having presumably scattered during the mad dash to tear apart the birds, snakes, and other beasts listening to Orpheus (11.20–22), the group now reassembles.[5] The primary reference of *coeunt*, however, is to the women's gathering for attack. Bömer's translation of "sich zusammenrotten," whose meaning also can include both "flock together" and "form a gang," captures the idea. Just so, earlier in the *Metamorphoses*—and with the same gory results—did the Maenads gather together to attack Pentheus (3.715–716, *ruit omnis in unum / turba furens: cunctae coeunt trepidumque sequuntur*), as did Actaeon's dogs in attacking their master (3.236, *cetera turba coit confertque in corpore dentes*). Later in the poem, the Laestrygonians' assault upon Ulysses' men parallels the movement of our passage even more closely: *coeunt et saxa trabesque / coniciunt* ... (14.239–240).

What only becomes clear when we have entered the first simile is that like the birds—and like Actaeon's dogs—the Thracian women are ringing their prey, are gathering *around* Orpheus.[6] The owl in question is not, as Bömer claims, the *bubo*, but, as other commentators note, the so-called "little owl," termed *noctua* by the Romans and γλαῦξ by the Greeks. Ovid's phrase *noctis avem* glosses the Latin name of the bird.[7] The phenomenon of small birds encircling and harassing this type of owl during the day is well attested by writers of natural history. Aristotle (or Pseudo-Aristotle) reports (*HA* 9.609a14–15) τῆς δ' ἡμέρας καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ὀρνίθια [i.e., besides wrens] τὴν γλαῦκα περιπέταται, ὃ καλεῖται θαυμάζειν, καὶ προσπετόμενα τίλλουσιν. Pliny describes how *noctuae* defend themselves in such circumstances, *maiore circumdatae multitudine* (*HN* 10.39).[8] Prone to weak vision during the day, the vulnerable *noctua* is surrounded and attacked by its natural avian enemies.[9]

Metamorphosen," in H. Görgemanns and E. A. Schmidt (eds.), *Studien zum antiken Epos* (Meisenheim am Glan 1976) 280–290, at 285.

[5]See Haupt-Korn-von Albrecht on 11.25 f.

[6]This essential fact has not been appreciated by the commentators. Haupt-Korn-von Albrecht note only the gathering of the women. Bömer on *coeunt* says nothing beyond "sich zusammenrotten." G. Murphy (Oxford 1972) is silent on the matter. J. A. Washietl, *De similitudinibus imaginibusque Ovidianis* (Vienna 1883) 6–7, misleadingly compares bird similes involving flight from a hawk (*Iliad* 17.755–757) and a multitude seeking shelter (Virgil *Georgics* 4.473–474). That the Thracian women will break the formation around Orpheus before the climactic kill, in their distracted dash after farm implements and bulls in the vicinity (11.30–38), does not disprove the existence of the hostile encircling immediately beforehand.

[7]At 2.564 the same term, *noctis avem*, is explicitly linked with Minerva, to whom the *noctua* was sacred. On the etymology *noctua* < *nox* see Varro *Ling.* 5.76, Paulus-Festus 178–179 L.

[8]See further D'Arcy Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford 1936) 78; also Otto Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt* (Leipzig 1913) 2.41.

[9]Weak vision: Aelian 3.9, Aristotle *HA* 9.619b19. In his list of enemies within the bird kingdom Pliny (*HN* 10.203) has *noctuae et ceterae minores*. Thompson (above, n. 8) 78: "Note: that the Little Owl, *Athene noctua*, is an insatiable destroyer of young birds."

As phrased by Ovid, the image seems to recall the very opening of the passage, the moment when the women first spot Orpheus and launch their initial, abortive attacks (11.1–5):

> *carmine dum tali silvas animosque ferarum*
> *Threicius vates et saxa sequentia ducit,*
> *ecce nurus Ciconum tectae lymphata ferinis*
> *pectora velleribus tumuli de vertice cernunt*
> *Orphea* ....

Much is made of the sighting of the *vates*. Immediately after these verses, a woman emphatically points out the hated one to her companions: *"en" ait "en, hic est nostri contemptor!"* (11.7). The narrator's own *ecce* (11.3) participates in the motif, as if he is imitating the subjects of his narrative. Appropriately, the simile heightens the women's renewed attack by, in part, calling to mind the original, forcefully stated sighting of the *vates*: *coeunt ... si quando ... cernunt*. The echo, albeit slight, reflects the resumptive aspect of this moment in the narrative continuum.

Complementing, and confirming, this echo is a more purely conceptual reminiscence of the narrative's setting in the simile. When Ovid sets the scene for the assault upon Orpheus (quoted just above), he is recapitulating his earlier description of the singer and his audience. Verbal repetitions reinforce the resumption of the narrative after the 592-line quotation of Orphean songs (10.143–144; cf. 11.1–2):[10]

> *tale nemus vates attraxerat inque ferarum*
> *concilio medius turba volucrumque sedebat.*

We are here offered the clearest depiction of the setting for Orpheus' performance. He was seated in the center (*medius*) of birds and other beasts who had thronged about to hear him. The transference of *concilium* from its usual association with humans to animals suggests the music's calming effect on wild nature: the beasts assemble around Orpheus like a civilized audience. In our simile, the spellbound *turba volucrum* and *ferarum concilium* have been pointedly replaced by a hostile *coetus avium*. Where birds and other beasts gathered around the enchanting *vates*, the metaphorical birds surround the owl representing Orpheus to attack it. It is true that no birds are explicitly mentioned at the outset of our passage (11.1–5), where *saxa* take their place in the tricolon renewed from 10.143–144, partly for the sake of variation, in part to set up the narrative's ensuing demonstration of Orpheus' power over stones (11.10–13). But, overall, birds are a prominent group in Ovid's version of the singer's audience, and were long a part of

[10]Cf. E. J. Kenney's note (437) to the translation of the *Metamorphoses* by A. D. Melville (Oxford 1986) 437.

the traditional picture of Orpheus performing in the wilds.[11] Besides their mention at 10.143–144, in the description picked up at the start of Book 11, birds figure first in the list of animal auditors torn apart by the women right before the simile (11.20–21, *ac primum attonitas etiamnum voce canentis / innumeras volucres*). Likewise, *maestae volucres* (11.44) later head up Ovid's catalog of those mourning Orpheus' death. There seems to be a genuine significance, then, not just a coincidence, in the content shared (birds, gathering) by the simile and the narrative's *mise en scène*.

What I am suggesting is that the bird/owl simile ironically reconfigures the scene that the Thracian women are in the process of destroying. Relevant here is another dimension of the opening lines of Book 11 that has been repeated from 10.143–144. Again, Orpheus' musical enchantment is understood as a restraining or soothing of wild nature. This is brought out by the phrase ending the first verse, *animosque ferarum*[12] (cf. *ferarum concilio* at 10.143–144). Here, however, other figures also have a feral aspect: the Thracian women, as worshippers of Bacchus, are *tectae ... ferinis ... velleribus*. But, in contrast to Orpheus' minions, their spirits are frenzied (*lymphata ... pectora*),[13] as if in the wild state from which the real beasts have been transformed. Later in the passage the women are explicitly termed *ferae* (11.37). The related words placed at the close of verses 1 and 3 (*ferarum / ferinis*) thus bring out a fundamental contrast, between "representatives" of tamed and untamed nature. It is within this nexus of ideas that the bird simile's reformulation of the narrative's setting operates. Once the women thwart Orpheus' musical power and attack the animals listening to the singer, the magical world of enchanted nature fashioned by the *vates* collapses, even if only temporarily.[14] It is overrun by frenzied forces at odds with, and apparently immune to, the singer's soothing charms. With the ascendancy of the Maenads, the forces of nature

[11]For the literary evidence, see K. Ziegler, "Orpheus," *RE* 18.1 (1939) 1199–1315, at 1248; on representations in art, O. Gruppe in W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* 3.1 (Leipzig 1897–1902) 1172–1202.

[12]*Pace* Bömer (on 11.1), who would differentiate the use of the phrase here from its occurrence at 10.547 (same *sedes*). He sees the present instance as mainly periphrastic ("fere i. q. 'feras'"). It is not impossible, however, that the latter instance is a subtle Ovidian reference to the former, which occurs in one of the tales sung by Orpheus. At 10.547–549 Venus cautions Adonis: *non movet aetas / nec facies nec, quae Venerem movere, leones / saetigerosque sues oculosque animosque ferarum*. Orpheus himself, however, the teller of this story, does move *animos ferarum* with his songs. The (here, negating) reversal is typical of Ovidian echoes and allusions.

[13]*pectora* here does double duty, referring to both the breast (with *tectae*) and the faculties within it (with *lymphata*).

[14]In the narrative movement following our passage, the various parts of nature that responded to Orpheus' songs lament the singer's death (11.44–49).

have, so to speak, reverted to their wild state anterior to Orpheus' arrival.[15] The simile enacts this "reversion." The new hostile encircling of Orpheus expressed in terms of birds attacking an owl both replaces and mocks the old peaceful circle of real animals around the singer. As for Orpheus himself, he too, figuratively, breaks down like his own power to tame wild nature. He too is metaphorically swept into wild nature, set upon by those to whose world he at once belongs and does not (*aves / noctis avem*; cf. 11.2–3, *Threicius vates / nurus Ciconum*). But, mirroring the minds of his attackers (cf. 11.7, *nostri contemptor*), the magnificent *vates* is now only a weakened predator, a day-blind *noctua* "wandering" (*vagantem*) out of its nocturnal element.

This reformulation of the narrative is paralleled by another sort of inversion in our simile. It seems that the phenomenon of little birds gathering together around the *noctua* in the daytime more regularly had a metaphorical sense directly opposite to Ovid's. Aristotle, in the passage quoted above, reports that the event was referred to as "attendance upon" or "honoring" the owl (ὃ καλεῖται θαυμάζειν).[16] In a remarkable coincidence with Ovid not noted by commentators, Lucian (*Harm.* 1) speaks of a famous musician around whom fans flock ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τὴν γλαῦκα τὰ ὄρνεα. Timon of Phlius uses the same comparison to illustrate a throng's "wonder" at a prominent arrival (Arcesilaus) in its midst: οἱ δέ μιν ἠΰτε γλαῦκα πέρι σπίζαι τερατοῦντο.[17] At least for the Greeks, then, and probably for the Romans too, the real hostility in birds clustering around an owl has been transmuted into a symbol of respect towards, or reverential attendance upon, a distinguished individual. That two of the above mentioned examples are similes strongly suggests that the usage is proverbial. Ovid, of course, applies the phenomenon more naturalistically, in accord with its meaning in the avian world: the Thracian women, like small birds, gather around their prey as a prelude to an attack. But it is hard to believe that the apparently proverbial sense of

[15]Cf. E. W. Leach, "Ekphrasis and the Theme of Artistic Failure in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *Ramus* 3 (1974) 102–142, at 126: "The artist is isolated amidst nature. The order he has created is ultimately powerless to defend him. Nature in its fullest sense includes not only the enchanted circle of beasts and trees, but also the Maenads and the violent passions Orpheus has attempted to deny by his art. In the hands of the raging women, nature becomes a means of destruction . . . ."

[16]See LSJ 2.b s.v. θαυμάζω, who call the usage in this passage technical. Aelian's notion (1.29) of the owl as a sorcerer bewitching other birds is something else entirely.

[17]H. Diels (ed.), *Poetarum philosophorum fragmenta* (Berlin 1901) fr. 34 (Diog. Laert. 4.42). The image of respectful attendance is here used ironically, since the surrounding crowd confounds the Academic philosopher's attempt to please it by criticizing him as a vain flatterer. In Timon's lampoon the Aristotelian is twisted into accusatory amazement; the becomes a . Like Ovid, Timon seems to play on the real and metaphorical meanings of this avian phenomenon.

the spectacle—attending upon the owl—does not resonate here as well, especially since that sense corresponds exactly with the meaning of the birds and beasts actually thronging about Orpheus in the narrative. The simple picture thus becomes a bold idea in its Ovidian application, an inversion of both the narrative's setting and the picture's usual signification to bring out the collapse of Orpheus and his world.

The second of the two similes also involves animal hostility, but in an artificial and explicitly contemporary[18] environment: "and just as a stag about to die is caught by dogs on the morning sand of the amphitheater." Its correspondence with the first comparison is in some respects not a neat one, which suggests that Ovid is aiming at more than mere parallelism. The subject shifts rather abruptly from the assailants (the women, the *aves*) to the victim (*cervus*). And the predicate chosen (*praeda est*) does not match *coeunt* exactly. These variations somewhat obscure the basis of the comparison—the image is the common one of a pack of dogs surrounding its prey[19]—or rather push it slightly to the background in order to highlight other aspects of the tableau. The result is an intensification of both the previous comparison and the entire narrative sequence.

The phenomenon itself, of hunting dogs catching a deer, marks an increase in destructiveness over the image of little birds harassing an owl. We are now offered a picture reminiscent of Actaeon's horrible demise in Book 3. Ovid's language underscores this thematic development of escalating violence. *periturus* and even *praeda est* take us a step beyond *coeunt* in charting the downfall of the *vates*. Tension builds toward the women's actual attack in the resumption of the narrative (11.27, *vatemque petunt*,

[18]See Kenney (above, n. 10). In Ovid's day *venationes* regularly took place before other spectacles in the arena (11.26, *matutina*). A further similarity is that both comparisons come from the world of hunting, albeit stylized in the second instance. Because of little birds' propensity to attack owls during the day, hunters used the latter to catch the former (Aristotle *HA* 9.609a15–16).

[19]Cf. 4.723, *apri, quem turba canum circumsona terret*. Ovid's obliqueness in drawing this comparison has evidently led some to take the second simile only with what follows, as referring to the actual attack: *vatemque petunt et fronde virentes / coniciunt thyrsos* ... (11.27–28). See Haupt-Korn-von Albrecht and Washietl (above, n. 6) 170. Inspection of the poem's numerous multiple similes referring to one thing and the fewer contiguous similes with separate referents shows that our comparisons belong in the former category. Juxtaposed similes with different referents are clearly distinguished from one another either by both being embedded within their referents (2.808–811, 3.78–80, 12.274–278) or by other clear links to the narrative (cf. 11.510–512, *utque ... sic*; 2.722–724, *quanto ... tanto*). When a simile of more than a word or brief phrase precedes its referent, Ovid uniformly resumes with *sic, tale, non aliter*, or the like. There are several parallels to our lines as a pair going with *coeunt*: cf. 4.362–367, 6.527–530, and 12.480–481, in all of which the first comparison shares its verb with the narrative (cf. *et coeunt, ut aves*), and in the last of which the subject shifts in the second simile (as in 11.26).

"they rush at the poet"). Importantly—and hence the subject shift—the figure of Orpheus himself is further weakened. Like the *noctis avis* appearing during the day, the *cervus* is out of its natural element, being part of a spectacle on the arena's sand. Yet the alien environment in this case, the amphitheater (*structoque utrimque theatro*), has the effect of doubly hemming in the victim, which is already ringed by dogs, and thereby of heightening the bird simile in yet another way. What is more, Orpheus has "degenerated" from the vulnerable predator of the first simile, a figure of some residual strength and stature, to the proverbial animal emblem of fear, the stag.[20] This progression of ideas from one simile to the next seems to mirror the movement of Ovid's narrative. In countering the women's initial assaults, the *vates* charmed a hurled stone to the ground; it fell before his feet "like a suppliant": *ac veluti supplex pro tam furialibus ausis* (11.12). Near the very end of our passage, at the climax of their *furialia ausa*, the impious Thracian women (11.41, *sacrilegae*) slaughter Orpheus as he extends his hands like a suppliant (11.39, *tendentemque manus*). The well-known if unspoken fearfulness of the stag surely evoked in the present circumstances anticipates this final poignant gesture. Moreover, and more conspicuously, the comparison also prefigures Orpheus' very death: the *cervus* is "about to die."

At the same time that it foreshadows the close, this simile, like the first, refracts an earlier portion of the narrative. This deepens the pivotal role of the pair of comparisons. Here the setting of the stag's demise acquires another significance. Immediately before the similes, the birds, snakes, and other animals attracted by Orpheus' music, those now set upon by the Bacchants, are called *Orphei titulum ... theatri*,[21] "the glory that was Orpheus' audience" (11.22). Ovid likens the animals charmed by the singer to spectators at a theatrical performance. In the simile, the endangered

[20]Numerous examples are cited by Bömer on 3.198. On our passage, because of the animal's proverbial fearfulness, Bömer remarks "Der Vergleich mit dem Hirsch ist für Orpheus nicht sehr ehrenvoll."

[21]Some editors have adopted the variant reading *triumphi*, which was in the text translated by Planudes into Greek. But this variant no doubt arose because of the very common association of *titulus* with achievements like victory and with the Roman triumph in particular (see G. Luck, *Ovid: Tristia* [Heidelberg 1967–1977], on *Tristia* 4.2.20). Exactly the same confusion occasioned the erroneous reading *triumphis* in some MSS at *Fasti* 5.189, *circus in hunc exit clamataque palma theatris* (see Pighi's apparatus). Ovid does not elsewhere in the narrative characterize Orpheus' attraction of trees, animals, and so forth as a victory. Yet the image of birds and beasts as a theatrical audience parallels *ferarum concilio* at 10.143–144. The phrase *Orphei ... theatri* is borrowed by Martial (*Spect.* 21.1, *Orpheo ... theatro*), even if he reorients the concept by making charmed nature part of the theatrical spectacle rather than the audience. It is hoped that the present suggestion of a thematic connection with *theatro* in 11.25 will help refute the argument that the latter occasioned a corruption to *theatri* in 11.22.

Orpheus as stag has become a different sort of performer in the arena. The superstar of the "theater" has been ironically metamorphosed into a victim in the amphitheater. The repetition *theatri* / *theatro* at the ends of nearby verses (cf. 11.1 and 11.3) underscores the connection between the theatrical images. Once again, the wild attack on the *vates* is presented in (inverted) terms of his now subdued powers of attraction.[22]

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