

A Jury of Furies: *Twelve Angry Men* and *The Eumenides*

Comparisons between ancient tragedy and modern American films have tended to focus on Greek tragedy's relationship to genres that seem more amenable to tragic heroism, such as Westerns or *films noir*. Examples of this include Martin Winkler's examination of John Ford's *The Searchers* and Mary-Kay Gamel's analysis of Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*. Such works allow for a vivid depiction of destructive forces and the limitations of individual efforts. But we can also see ancient/modern parallels in two works that offer a vision of the existence or restoration of order. Despite their obvious differences, Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* both deal with disruptions in the social order caused by crimes against kindred, and the ways in which surrogates of higher powers act to reaffirm the law. Also, however, we see how the rage occasioned by the disruption acts as a corrective to the crime, but also contains the potential for further crime.

Parallels with the Greek tragedy occur within the realistic setting of Rose's play. In Aeschylus, the Furies act as guardians and enforcers of laws; in *Twelve Angry Men*, we see the same role played by a human jury. The matricide of Orestes rouses the Furies to action; the apparent killing of a father by his son occasions the often violent jury deliberations of *Twelve Angry Men*. The title itself suggests the Furies. One in particular—Juror #3—behaves like the Furies at their most bloodthirsty and vengeful. He is angry at the prospect of the defendant “slip[ping] through our fingers”, as the Furies had been enraged at the escape of Orestes.

In both Aeschylus and Rose, the acquittal, important as it is, is secondary to the ways in which outsiders are integrated into a community or restored to it. Both Orestes and the Furies, outcasts for different reasons, eventually regain or receive a place in society. Many of the characters in *Twelve Angry Men* are marginalized also. At various points, jurors are isolated or ostracized by the others—initially Juror #8 (the lone dissenter), later #10 after he makes a racist speech, and finally #3 when he is the last holdout against acquittal. As they finally reach true consensus and condemnation turns into acquittal, the transformation of these latter-day Furies from wielders of curses to dispensers of blessings is complete.

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