

## Erinyes and *The Eumenides* in Euripides' *Medea*

That Euripides refers to the Erinyes in his *Medea* is unsurprising, given the centrality of vengeance to the plot. But these brief and seemingly unremarkable references could have had unsettling effects on Euripides' original audience. I will discuss how Erinyes figure in the play, and I will demonstrate that such references are likely to have called to mind Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. Finally, I will suggest some possible effects of this intertextuality.

Euripides makes two explicit references to Erinyes: the chorus labels Medea an Erinyes (*Med.* 1260), and Jason prays that an Erinyes will destroy Medea (*Med.* 1389). Medea is also implicitly identified with an Erinyes: when she claims to be a curse on Jason's house (*Med.* 608), Medea resembles the Erinyes, the embodiments of curses; and in punishing Jason's perjury (Kovacs 1993), Medea assumes a well-attested function of the Erinyes (*Il.* 19.259, *Hes. Op.* 803-4, *Alc. fr.* 129.13ff.). The serpents drawing Medea's chariot—if they originated with Euripides—offer a strong iconographical link with the Erinyes, who were routinely depicted as snakes in artwork preceding Aeschylus' anthropomorphic Erinyes, and who continued to be associated with snakes thereafter (Harrison 1908).

With these textual and visual references having brought the Erinyes to the audience's attention, *The Eumenides* may quite readily have come to mind, especially in view of the other intertextual links with the *Oresteia* noted by Boedeker (1997). Whereas earlier descriptions of the Erinyes were brief, Aeschylus' treatment was rich and extensive, and therefore probably the definitive portrayal of the Erinyes in the minds of Athenian theatergoers. Furthermore, narrative details in the *exodos* of *Medea* would have strengthened this association with *The Eumenides*: the "Erinyes" Medea goes to Athens, where she assumes a place of honor with the assistance and direction of the gods—a broad parallel with *The Eumenides*.

*Medea's* intertextual relationship with *The Eumenides* is significant in that it may have had powerful effects specific to an Athenian audience. Undercutting *Medea's* superficially pro-Athenian tone (*Med.* 824-45), Euripides' references to the Erinyes implicitly call Aeschylus' hopeful and patriotic messages into question. Where Aeschylus' Erinyes offer fertility to Athens (*Eu.* 904-12, 938-45), the "Erinyes" Medea dramatically represents infertility by murdering her own children. While *The Eumenides* speaks of Athens waging wars of conquest abroad (*Eu.* 864-5), Medea, as supposed mythical ancestor of the Medes (Hdts. 7.62), reminds the Athenian audience of the lingering Persian threat. In *The Eumenides* Athena wins the Erinyes over with gentle persuasion (*Eu.* 885-8), but the "Erinyes" Medea resolutely resists the other characters' attempts to talk her out of her anger and scheming (*Med.* 28-9, 811-9). While Athena stands as a stabilizing force in *The Eumenides*, in *Medea* Athena is conspicuously absent (though she figures prominently in other accounts of the Argonautic voyage, she is omitted from both *Medea's* and Jason's retellings), leaving Medea to exact vengeance untempered by any divine ameliorating force.

Aeschylus' resolution of *The Eumenides* leaves some uneasiness, because the Erinyes, while pacified and induced to offer blessings to Athens, retain their fearsome aspect and their capacity to exact justice from wrongdoers. Vengeance, Aeschylus seems to say, can be a force for stability and order—if harnessed by reason. But the Erinyes as depicted in *Medea* leave the audience with little hope that vengefulness will yield to reason. Medea-as-Erinyes exacts a terrible price for Jason's perjury, but Jason's prayers for Erinyes to punish Medea for her crimes are ignored. Justice, then, appears to be both brutally and selectively enforced by the gods. This

harshness and unpredictability makes the Erinyes a destabilizing force, negating the blessings of order that Aeschylus envisions in *The Eumenides*.

Boedeker, D. "Becoming Medea: assimilation in Euripides." in *Medea. Essays on Medea in myth, literature, philosophy, and art*. ed. Clauss, J. and S. I. Johnston. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. 127-48.

Harrison, J. E. *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908.

Kovacs, D. "Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*." *American Journal of Philology* 114 (1993) 45-70.