

Venus Furiens: On Madness, Illicit Union, and Augustan Moral Reform in Vergil's *Aeneid*

The significance of *furor*, the Furies, and related imagery in Vergil's *Aeneid* has long been a focus of scholarly discussion. However, the connections between these patterns and the Augustan moral reforms of the early first century have not been fully explored.

In this paper, I argue that the *Aeneid* associates the Furies with untenable socio-emotional bonds, in ways that reflect Augustus's early and ongoing efforts of to legislate marriage and reproduction in the new empire. These regulations transformed love, sex, and reproduction from private, familial concerns to public and legislative matters.

Vergil would have found a similar shift in the portrayal of the Furies (Erinyes) in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. At the end of the *Eumenides*, as these ancient goddesses take on their new role as tutelary deities of Athens, they move away from arbitrating and punishing individual, intra-familial crimes, to preserving the *polis* and the collective well-being of its citizens (*Eum.* 938-987). They promise to maintain civic stability by, among other things, preventing discord and civil war (976-987), increasing fertility (921-925, 938-946), and ensuring that every maiden a husband for life (958-960).

Building on this Aeschylean shift from private to public, from family to polis, Vergil similarly associates his Furies not with familial conflict or oath-breaking, but with the intersection of personal relationships and communal consequences. In the *Aeneid*, the Furies and their symbols—including torches, serpents, fire, darkness, and madness (*furor*)—consistently mark moments of doomed love or other untenable socio-emotional bonds with consequences that extend far beyond the individuals involved.

Specifically, Vergil's Furies are aligned with erotic or quasi-erotic unions—such as those between Dido and Aeneas, Amata and Turnus, Turnus and Lavinia, and Apollo and the Sibyl—that fail to produce offspring. Much like Augustan moral reforms, the *Aeneid*'s use of Ferial imagery re-identifies the personal and familial as political, linking misplaced or non-generative eroticism with the destabilization and downfall of the state.