

*Dirae Parcae: The Furies and the Fates in Ovid's Metamorphoses and Statius' Thebaid*

Although Greek tradition holds that the Furies are sisters (*Theog.* 185, *Eum.* 416, *OC* 40), this relationship is rarely emphasized. In Vergil's *Aeneid*, however, they account for half of the uses of *sorores*, and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* they are regularly referred to as sisters. This shift makes space for a parallel between the Furies and the Fates, and, in the tale of Althaea and Meleager (*Met.* 8.449-485), Ovid activates this parallel both thematically and structurally. In Statius' *Thebaid*, not only are the goddesses framed as groups of sisters, but the functional and thematic divisions between them are increasingly blurred. By analyzing how the shifting depictions of the Furies made room for such a parallel, this paper sheds light on both a previously unnoted aspect of the divine landscape of the *Thebaid* and the role of both Fates and Furies in Latin literature.

In Book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, Althaea calls upon the Eumenides to witness the dreadful vengeance she is about to take on her son for the death of her brothers, invoking them as the “three-fold goddesses of punishment,” (*poenarum 'que 'dae triplices,* *Met.* 8.481). This echoes the earlier reference to the Fates as the “three sisters” (*triplices ... sorores,* *Met.* 8.452), and the framing effect of the two groups of goddesses is accentuated by their narrative connection to the log that is bound to Meleager's life. The Furies are called to witness by Althaea as she prepares to thrust the log into the fire, thus killing her son; the Fates are shown, in a narrative flashback, creating the link between Meleager and the log, which Althaea then snatches from the fire to preserve him (*Met.* 8.451-457).

The parallel has been noted by commentators (most recently Kenney 2011), but its potential significance has been largely overlooked, although Anderson rightly points to how it emphasizes Althaea's conflict, taking it as “ironic comment” (1972, 375). Although it might be

no more than that in Ovid, the two sets of goddesses are also united by their implacable natures and connection with death, so the pairing is especially fitting for this scene. This thematic association is underscored by the fact that the invocation recalls two references in Book 9 of the *Iliad* to the Furies as enforcers of oaths and family order, one of which (*Il.* 9.571-72) refers to precisely the same moment of Althaea calling for Meleager's death, though she does so directly in this earlier version, with no mention of the log.

In the *Thebaid*, the word *sorores* is used equally often to identify the Furies and the Fates (and several additional times to refer to subsets of the Furies), but it is no longer simply the case that the former resemble the latter, for Statius' Fates seem to have much in common with the Furies. As if to make explicit their shared area of responsibility, they work side by side in the Underworld, processing the newly dead with purification and the severing of the threads of life (*Theb.* 8.9-13) and assisting Hades as he sits in judgment (*Theb.* 8.24-27). Even more striking, though, is that they are not only harsh (*aspera...Fata*, *Theb.* 1.173-4; *duris...Parcis*, *Theb.* 3.491; *durae ... Parcae*, *Theb.* 6.325), but also *dirae* (6.923), which is an adjective that is very strongly associated with the Furies. This supports the general divine inversions that pervade the *Thebaid*, as Feeney 1991 has shown, and the references to the Fates as actively harmful (*Parcaeque nocentes*, *Theb.* 11.189; *Parcasque nocentes*, *Theb.* 11.462) solidify this realignment. Furthermore, the traditional role of guardians of order that eased the parallel in the first place is now precisely what forms the locus for the twisted and dark order that pervades the *Thebaid*.

#### Bibliography

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