

Hell Hath no Fury: Reassessing the Erinyes in Sophocles' *Electra*

Sophocles' *Electra* contains a striking omission: at the end of the play, the Furies do not take revenge on Orestes for murdering Clytemnestra as they do in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Aesch. *Cho.* 1048ff) and Euripides' *Electra* (Eur. *El.* 1252-3). This absence of divine punishment for the matricide has polarized opinion, with some viewing the play as a dark interrogation of the immorality of matricide (Kells 1973, e.g. 128; Winnington-Ingram 1980), and others regarding it as a positive justification for the matricide (March 2001, 18, and n.71; MacLeod 2001, 179). I broadly agree with these positive interpretations of the *Electra*, but I take issue with their trivializing treatment of the Furies. In this paper, I will offer a reassessment of the goddesses' place, arguing that we ought to see in Sophocles' tragedy an engagement with and reconfiguration of Aeschylus' treatment of the myth. To date only Winnington-Ingram (1980, 227) has examined in detail Sophocles' engagement with Aeschylus in the *Electra*. For him, allusions to the Erinyes of the *Oresteia* feature prominently and suggest a possible dark ending to the *Electra* in the imminent pursuit of Orestes by the divine hounds of vengeance. I take as my starting point a critique of Winnington-Ingram's approach made briefly by Finglass (2007, 6 n.6): that he does not pay sufficient attention to the differences between Aeschylus and Sophocles. Indeed, I will argue that the Aeschylean intertext is utilized by Sophocles precisely to show just how different his Furies are. Winnington-Ingram's study has also relied too heavily on the *Choephoroi* as the major intertext; I will argue that instead we should look to the *Eumenides*.

As Lloyd-Jones (1989, 5) argues, there is a development in the role of the Furies in Aeschylus: they start as general avengers of wrong (e.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 55-62), but there is a gradual change which culminates in the image of them as punishers of murder (e.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 1431;

1577-82) which continues in the *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides*. And at the end of the *Eumenides* the Furies are transformed and instead of goddesses of vengeance, they take on a role as protectors of children and marriage. I will briefly compare their treatment in Aeschylus to the Homeric tradition where we see them associated with marriage and adultery as well as familial blood strife.

I will consider, then, three problems raised by Aeschylus' presentation of the Furies in the *Eumenides* and how Sophocles reorients his presentation of the goddesses in response, using Apollo's own critiques of Fury justice as presented in the *Eumenides*. These three problems are: 1) the Furies are avengers of familial bloodshed to the exclusion of their role upholding oaths; 2) they act on behalf of the parent against a child; 3) Their justice is opposed to that of the Olympians. I will argue that Sophocles innovatively presents the Furies acting for Electra, daughter against mother; indeed she all but becomes a Fury (Nooter 2011, 416). He achieves this by reorienting the Furies' focus to adultery as much as murder (e.g. Soph. *El.* 112-4; 271-6), thereby answering a problem posed by Apollo in *Eumenides* – what about the Furies of Agamemnon (Aesch. *Eum.* 211)? Apollo says that the Furies should respect marriage because protecting oaths is also one of their duties (Aesch. *Eum.* 217-18). Sophocles makes it a primary duty. Sophocles also distances Clytemnestra from her role as mother to Electra and Orestes (e.g. 775-6; March 2001, 207) and places Electra in the role of mother (1145-6). By making Clytemnestra a “mother who is no mother” (1154), Sophocles renders the crime of Orestes a justified punishment for adultery rather than a matricide. Despite being “a mother who is no mother” Clytemnestra is repeatedly referred to as the one who gave birth to her children. Sophocles is here building on an argument of Apollo in the *Eumenides* that the father is the true parent, the mother a mere vehicle (Aesch. *Eum.* 658ff). I conclude by arguing that Sophocles'

Furies are based on the goddesses in their transformed state at the end of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. They are at once agents of vengeance and protectors of children and marriage.

Bibliography

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