

Art-Horror in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*

The terrifying, animalistic chorus of Furies in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* were certainly scary, and according to one well-known but likely apocryphal anecdote, were so scary that their arrival onstage resulted in women having miscarriages and children fainting (*Life of Aeschylus* 9). Even if this story were not true, the fact that such extreme audience responses were even conceivable to the ancient Greeks points to the idea that the Furies were, indeed, frightening figures. This paper, however, is not concerned with whether the Furies were scary or frightening; rather, it investigates whether they were *horrifying*, a comparatively neglected topic in the study of *Eumenides*. Furthermore, it explores whether we should consider Aeschylus' *Eumenides* to be horror – an ancient analogue to modern horror fiction (e.g. *Dracula*), horror film (e.g. *Alien*), horror television (e.g. *American Horror Story*), and horror musical (e.g. *Phantom of the Opera*), etc.

While scholars occasionally refer to the Furies as horrifying or producing horror (e.g. Mitchell-Boyask 2009), they fail to utilize any theoretical approaches from horror studies; consequently, these scholars are speaking about horror loosely, and not in a technical sense. In philosophy of horror, the predominant theory is that of Noel Carroll (1990), who argues that horror – or more properly, art-horror (to distinguish these artistic/literary forms of horror from real-life natural horror) – occurs when the thought of a threatening, impure (cf. Douglas 1966) monster produces a set of physically felt agitations in the audience member. Horror monsters are those unclean and viscerally revolting beings that make audience members respond by shuddering, recoiling, shrinking away, screaming, feeling weak, or feeling nausea. Horror monsters are indescribable – things so threatening and disgusting that they cannot be placed into

clear categories, what Carroll calls “categorically interstitial.” Furthermore, horror operates, at least ideally, through a form of audience mirroring – whenever the internal audiences feel the emotion of art-horror (and therefore scream and shudder and recoil), the external audience does as well.

I propose that the Furies satisfy every condition that Carroll puts forth for a horror monster. When the Pythia first sees them in the temple, she states that “things truly fearful (*deina*) to speak of, fearful to behold with the eyes, have driven me back out of the house of Loxias; they have taken away my strength and made me unable to stand upright” (34-36). The sight of the Furies immediately produces fear and physical responses of recoiling, shrinking away, and weakness. Unlike the Pythia’s precise description of Orestes, when she first attempts to describe the Furies, she finds them to be indescribable: “there is an extraordinary band of women, asleep, sitting on chairs – no, I won’t call them women, but Gorgons; but then I can’t liken their form to that of Gorgons either” (46-49). The Furies are women but not women; Gorgons but not Gorgons. Furthermore, the Pythia’s physical description characterizes them as disgusting, threatening, and impure: “these ones, though, it is plain to see, don’t have wings, and they’re black and utterly nauseating. They’re pumping out snores that one doesn’t dare come near, and dripping a loathsome drip from their eyes. And their attire is one that it’s not proper to bring either before the images of the gods or under the roofs of men” (52-56). Later in the play when the Furies catch sight of Orestes, they declare that they want him to “give in return a thick red liquid from your limbs for us to slurp from your living body” (264-266). As the external audience, we (and for that matter, the ancient audience that allegedly had miscarriages and fainted) feel the same emotional reaction as the internal audience of the Pythia does. Since the

Furies are categorically interstitial, impure monsters that provoke audience fear and disgust, the Furies are horror monsters.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, we might consider this to be an interesting matter of reception: according to modern definitions of horror, *Eumenides* counts as horror, and therefore we are justified in assessing it in that way when *we* feel horror when reading it. Second – a stronger claim – since horror, with its blend of the more primary emotions of fear and disgust, seems to be a basic human emotion, we are justified in assessing *Eumenides* simply as horror, not in our modern opinion, but as a matter of fact. If so, while there may not have been a recognized genre of horror in antiquity as there is now, it may be the case that *Eumenides* is one of the first examples of horror fiction (and certainly of horror drama) in the western tradition.

Bibliography

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