

Monstrous Crowns and the New Furies of Roman Epic

Some of our earliest Greek references to the Furies portray them as enforcers of oaths and family relationships. They are closely associated with the Underworld and guilt-driven madness. As Underworld goddesses associated with punishment and insanity, they are appropriately terrifying, but they also seem to support and maintain social bonds and order.

In Vergil's *Aeneid*, we see a new sort of Fury, who inflames passions and incites violations of the same social bonds that she was originally responsible for punishing. The influence of these Furies was enormous, and it is particularly visible in the imagery and conceptualization of demons in the Christian West.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and, especially, Statius's *Thebaid*, we seem to see a reprise and elaboration of the image of Furies as authorities of the Underworld. This was certainly not absent from the *Aeneid*'s Furies, but it is given new emphasis in the later epics, along with a more developed image of an infernal court (*Theb.* 1.85, 4.526, 8.24-26, et al.). The Furies here are representatives not merely residents of the Underworld, and their snakes — now an emblem in turn that instantly evokes the Furies and can be adopted by other divinities — are frequently borne as crowns rather than weapons.

These Furies also come to be represented as ruling in the world above. Vergil's Allecto wreaks havoc but is eventually dismissed; Ovid twice refers to a reigning Fury in the *Metamorphoses* (*fera regnat Erinys*, 1.241, and *insanaque regnat Erinys*, 11.14), and Statius gives us a poem pervaded by the Furies, especially Tisiphone, who has long frequented Thebes. Particularly relevant to this paper, in Oedipus' opening invocation, he not only addresses her as queen of the Underworld but offers her his own bloody crown (1.82-86). When the poet turns to

the Fury, her disgusting and terrifying appearance reaches new levels of monstrosity (1.103-113), and we learn that she has Atropos and Proserpina herself as attendants (1.111).

The authority pointed out in this paper is notably absent in the imagery of female demonic figures as developed in later tradition, in which they are seductive and destructive agents of an authority that is intrinsically male. In Roman epic from Vergil to the Flavians, however, the Furies are more officers than foot soldiers. Their power and capacity for innovation and decision-making renders them almost autonomous, and their gender does not make them subordinate.

Recent studies of monsters (Lowe 2015 and, more generally, Asma 2009, Gilmore 2003) shed light on the context of the Furies, especially with the increasing attention given to their monstrous physical forms. From their earliest literary representations, however, the Furies are not monsters but divinities. They have always had their own domain, but this becomes far more extensive and flexible in Latin epic. Another, later, facet of this context appears in the interaction of the traditions of biblical and literary commentary in Medieval Irish texts, where we see an apparent interchangeability among female demonic figures, across literary and mythological boundaries (see Borsje and Clarke).

This paper demonstrates that the Furies, as they become more authoritative, become ever more monstrous, both in actions and in their physical form. Their power, moreover, is more consistently depicted as residing in their snakes, their characteristic monstrous trait. It goes on to suggest that the image of female authority, familiar and troubling (as perhaps best exemplified by Juno, in the context of classical epic), becomes a fundamental monstrosity for later readings, characteristic of a shifting category of female demonic figures.

The Furies in these epics, therefore, inhabit a distinctive space that seems, in this respect, to parallel the increased authority and influence, official and unofficial, of human women in the power and politics of imperial Rome.

Bibliography

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