**HEARING THE ERINYES' VOICES: THOUGHTS ON THE 'BINDING SONG' (*EU*. 307-96)**

Can we contextualize a chorus of Erinyes? This is an essential question, yet one often overlooked by critics approaching *Eumenides*. The chorus of this play is utterly unique, and, if the *Life of Aeschylus* is any indication, it shocked the original audience.[1] Yet, the chorus of Erinyes is hardly "random," (D. K. Roselli 2011: 160) nor should it be dismissed as an extreme example of Aeschylean bombast. Rather, it should be understood in terms of *mousikē* and *choreia*—the essential elements of what might be termed ancient Athenian performance culture.

## Background: *Mousikē* and *Choreia*

Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson provide a helpful account of *mousikē* in the introduction to *Music and the Muses: The culture of mousikē in the classical Athenian city* (2004: 1-2):

> In its commonest form, mousike represented for the Greeks a seamless complex of instrumental music, poetic word, and co-ordinated physical movement. As such, it encompassed a vast array of performances, from small-scale entertainment in the private home to elaborate festivals in which an entire *polis* was involved. *Mousikē* was an endlessly variegated, rich set of cultural practices, with strongly marked regional traditions that made them a valuable item of local self-definition as well as a means for exchange and interaction. It also displays a markedly self-reflective element.

So too, *choreia*, (< *choreuō*, the verb from which the noun 'chorus' is derived, in Ancient Greek as in Modern English) is not merely 'dancing' but the act of being a chorus, that is, singing and dancing, often in a circle. The sense (if not the strict

[1] Aeschylus. (2009), *Oresteia*, trans. C. Collard, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. xlvii, citing the ancient *Life of Aeschylus* 1.35-1.38

definition) of the word seems to have been broadened to include performance, as, for instance Wilson notes, dramatic productions were regarded as fundamentally choral in nature.[2] This culture of musical expression, then, had a chorus at its heart. These choruses, in turn, would have been firmly rooted in the *polis* which oversaw the funding and training of choruses, as well as competitive choral performances. Choruses thus became an essential element of civic life.[3] Indeed, in his work *The Athenian Institution of the Khoregia: The Chorus, The City and The Stage,* Wilson (2000: 12) compares choral performances with communal animal sacrifice, the essential act of Greek religion:

> The sacrifice of a beast brought benefits that could be enjoyed without conflict between mortal and god: food to sustain the sacrificing community and to unite its members through a shared meal, the savour of the burnt bones and fat to please and honour the god. So too in these other forms of expenditure for the gods, divine pleasure was by no means incompatible with great benefits for the mortal donors. In choral performance, communities honoured the gods and brought glory to themselves through this conspicuously enjoyable form of religious dedication.

This image of social relationships being reaffirmed in an atmosphere of mutual rejoicing is fundamental to the culture of fifth-century Athens, and, as we shall see, one which informs Aeschylus' handling of the Erinyes in *Eumenides.*

**Who Are These Erinyes?: Pre-Aeschylean Accounts**

Before Aeschylus, Erinyes are, as a rule, described in terms of specific actions they take. Nowhere are they described physically, or portrayed as speaking, much less singing. The surviving evidence suggests that Aeschylus' contemporaries did not think of them in anthropomorphic terms or associate them with song of any sort. Heraclitus

[2] P. Wilson. (2000: 2); on the unity of music and dance see also T. Georgiades. (1973: 17).
[3] I do not mean to imply that the institution of the chorus (or indeed, individual choruses) are therefore 'political' or 'politicized' in the current meaning of those terms.

provides a good general description of their role when he labels them 'Δίκης ἐπίκουροι' or the 'allies of order'.[4] In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Erinyes primarily intervene in human and divine affairs in order to defend or maintain the integrity of kin-relationships, the very framework of Homeric society. They avenge wronged parents (*Il.* 9.454-456; *Od.* 11.279-280) and victims of internecine violence (*Il.* 9.569-572). They also seek to preserve and maintain the Olympian family, as when Iris cautions Poseidon not to direct harsh words at Zeus, noting that the Erinyes defend the rights of elders in arguments (*Il.* 15.200-204). That they could punish later generations is suggested in Pindar's *Second Olympian* (ll. 35-42), where an Erinys is identified as an agent of Moira and carries out Laius' curse against his children. Both Homer and Hesiod identify them as the guardians of oaths (*Works and Days* 802-804; *Il.* 19.259-263), which seems natural, as oaths may be sworn to strengthen ties between members of the same clan or to establish a sacrosanct relationship outside of one's clan.

Despite this strong association with *dikē*, there are two instances in the Homeric poems where an Erinys is said to act independently (that is, without being spurred on by an outrage against order) to inflict *atē*, blindness or bewilderment (*Il.* 19.87ff.; *Od.* 15.233-234). Sommerstein (1989: 7-8) surmises that "The only link between this and the

[4] Ἥλιος οὐχ ὑπερβήσεται μέτρα· εἰ δὲ μή, Ἐρινύες μιν Δίκης ἐπίκουροι ἐξευρήσουσιν – The sun will not exceed his boundaries and if he does, the Erinyes, helpers of justice, will find him out (trans. G. T. W. Patrick. See: Heraclitus. (1889: 91). Greek text cited from: Heraclitus, (1954: 284). This fragment implies that the Erinyes are guardians of *dikē* in the broadest sense. As Jaeger notes, "The Erinyes avenge any violation of what we should call the natural law of life. Cf. Il. 19.418." W. Jaeger. (1947: 229, n. 31). While the Erinyes are thus guardians of *dikē* in general, they are mainly associated with relationships between individuals rather than the regulation of natural phenomena. The wide-ranging powers of the Erinyes parallel those of the Vedic god Varuna. Varuna originally upheld cosmic order, witnessed contracts among others, was present at gatherings, shared the title of Lord of the Dead with Yama, was known as the hangman, and would hang wrongdoers with a snake lasso. Significantly, he is also thought to have bound his victims and there are spells that invoke him and specifically ask that he bind the hands, feet, or tongues of wrongdoers (see A. Lubotsky. (2002: 110-114) This connection between divine preservers of order and binding curses thus seems quite ancient. We cannot at present link it to an Indo-European source, but are investigating these links further.

Erinyes' other functions seems to be the idea that they are essentially maleficent". If we look at these passages more closely, however, we find that in both cases, an Erinys (regarded as a bringer of *atē*) is blamed (partially in the first passage and wholly in the second) for the social isolation of the human figures involved: In the *Iliad* passage, Agamemnon is giving an account of his rash decision to take Briseis, the woman originally allotted to Achilles as his war prize, for himself, labeling it a fit of *atē* and associating that with a liminal Erinys.[5] In the *Odyssey* passage, an Erinys is described as bringing *atē* upon Melampus, who is also isolated in the house of Phylacus and suffering on account of a daughter of Neleus.[6] I would like to suggest, given that an individual's social isolation can be explained away as the result of *atē,* that there is an implicit association between social isolation and *atē (and, thus, the Erinyes themsleves, as socially isolated goddesses)*. It is not that the Erinyes are "essentially maleficent" as Sommerstein supposes, but rather that their own liminal nature carries with it the threat of destructive violence. This is not because the Erinyes themselves are fundamentally destructive or violent creatures *per se*, but because they are socially isolated. In the next section, we shall demonstrate how Aeschylus connected the Erinyes' social isolation with the notion of violent instability through *mousikē* in the Binding Song.

[5] He also invokes Zeus and Moira, implying that his actions were divinely determined. This could further imply that Agamemnon's blindness was a just punishment for earlier misdeeds. Any reader familiar with the *Iliad* will know that one should not take Agamemnon's own account of events at face value; he is a dubious figure in the poem. Indeed, blaming Zeus, Moira, and an Erinys could be seen as a grandiose excuse for his reckless behavior.

[6] The details are obscure but Melampus may have done wrong himself, which his kinsman Theoclymenus would not wish to advertise.

**Bringing the Erinyes into the World of *Mousikē:* The Chorus and its Binding Song**

Aeschylus is the first poet to imagine the Erinyes as a chorus; thus locating them squarely within the larger cultural context of *mousikē* and *choregia*. Nowhere in the *Oresteia* is there any doubt of their choral identity, Cassandra, the first figure who discerns the presence of these fearful creatures, not only identifies them as a chorus but describes them *in terms of the song they sing*:

> τὴν γὰρ στέγην τήνδ' οὔποτ' ἐκλείπει χορὸς
> ξύμφθογγος οὐκ εὔφωνος: οὐ γὰρ εὖ λέγει.
> καὶ μὴν πεπωκώς γ', ὡς θρασύνεσθαι πλέον,
> βρότειον αἷμα κῶμος ἐν δόμοις μένει,
> δύσπεμπτος ἔξω, συγγόνων Ἐρινύων.
> ὑμνοῦσι δ' ὕμνον δώμασιν προσήμεναι
> πρώταρχον ἄτην: ἐν μέρει δ' ἀπέπτυσαν
> εὐνὰς ἀδελφοῦ τῷ πατοῦντι δυσμενεῖς. (*Ag*. 1186-1193)
>
> The choir that sings as one, yet sings its tunes
> discordantly and only brings on discord,
> can't leave this house. Yes, soused on human blood
> to utter recklessness, a home-brewed,
> rioting band of Erinyes is dwelling there,
> not easily driven out. And what they sing of,
> as they carouse from room to room, is that
> first mayhem, that ancestral sin, as one
> by one each spits on a brother's bed
> that brought destruction to its defiler. (*Ag*. 1186-1193 / *Ag.* 1357-66[7] trans. Shapiro and Burian)

While the Erinyes are specifically identified as a chorus (and thus located within the culture and tradition of *mousikē* in the Athenian *polis*) they remain apart from it, even opposed to it.[8] They sing "together but out of tune" — ξύμφθογγος οὐκ εὔφωνος — and

[7] See above n. 1.
[8] Cf. Wilson and Taplin. (1993: 171, 174).

hymn familial discord, rather than social unity.[9] Moreover, their song seems to originate from another realm, as only Cassandra can perceive it. It is not a song that can easily transition to the stage; when they first appear, they neither sing nor speak, they merely moan (*Eu.* 117ff.). Only when they finally come face-to-face with Orestes (and are not immediately rebuffed by Apollo) do they begin to sing a song they call their own:

> ἄγε δὴ καὶ χορὸν ἄψωμεν, ἐπεὶ
> μοῦσαν στυγερὰν
> ἀποφαίνεσθαι δεδόκηκεν,
> λέξαι τε λάχη τὰ κατ᾽ ἀνθρώπους
> ὡς ἐπινωμᾷ στάσις ἀμά.
> εὐθυδίκαιοι δ᾽ οἰόμεθ᾽ εἶναι:
> τὸν μὲν καθαρὰς χεῖρας προνέμοντ᾽
> οὔτις ἐφέρπει μῆνις ἀφ᾽ ἡμῶν,
> ἀσινὴς δ᾽ αἰῶνα διοιχνεῖ:
> ὅστις δ᾽ ἀλιτὼν ὥσπερ ὅδ᾽ ἀνὴρ
> χεῖρας φονίας ἐπικρύπτει,
> μάρτυρες ὀρθαὶ τοῖσι θανοῦσιν
> παραγιγνόμεναι πράκτορες αἵματος
> αὐτῷ τελέως ἐφάνημεν. (*Eu.* 307-320)

> Let's dance as well as sing around him,
> hand in hand,
> and let's reveal the terrifying power of our dark melody
> and tell the way our company
> fulfills the offices assigned
> to us, our given
> right to guide the lives of men.
> We keep straight on the path of justice,
> that's our belief:
> our wrath is never aimed at the one
> who holds up hands no blood has stained
> for *that* one lives out his life unharmed.
> But the man, like this one here before us
> who tries to keep
> his red hands hit, yet reeks of guilt,
> will find us ever at his side,
> bearing witness
> truthfully for those who died,

[9] Cf. J. A. Haldane. (1965: 33-41) for a discussion of how musical themes presented in a disordered context come to be ill omens in the *Oresteia*.

the court of last appeal, the final
blood avengers. (*Eu.* 307-320 / *Eu.* 353-373[10] trans. Shapiro and Burian)

The Erinyes begin by proclaiming their intention to dance and sing as a chorus. Such overtly self-referential and meta-theatrical language possesses both performative and literary significance: it blurs the dramatic illusion separating the world of the play with that of the audience and prepares both the other figures on stage as well as the audience for a choral performance. This may seem obvious, but given the Erinyes' unorthodox and unpredictable manner of singing and dancing, thus far such a direct language no doubt served as a helpful, even necessary, cue to their audience. Secondly, it introduces a song which is more than a choral reflection—it is a manifesto given by figures who are otherwise ill-defined, and, up until this moment in the drama, did not seem able to express themselves on stage as a chorus. As terrifying as it might seem at the outset, the aim of this song was not simply to reinforce the image of the Erinyes as the black agents of grim Moira, for theirs is not a blind, random anger. They themselves specifically state (see above) that they will not punish an innocent individual, as they are upholders of order, or *dikē*. They go on to proclaim that their song is a curse to bind the mind of their victim—Orestes, the matricide who, in killing his mother, has violated one of the most basic social relationships they have been mandated to protect. His punishment is expressed in this ode performed for him and the larger audience. Meant to induce madness (that state in which one is totally cut off from one's fellows), it cannot be accompanied by the lyre or inspire any other figures to join in the dancing, but instead isolates the guilty party, bringing him into the liminal space which the Erinyes inhabit, the same space Cassandra was able to perceive in *Agamemnon*:

ἐπὶ δὲ τῷ τεθυμένῳ

[10] See above n. 1.

τόδε μέλος, παρακοπά,
παραφορὰ φρενοδαλής,
ὕμνος ἐξ Ἐρινύων,
δέσμιος φρενῶν, ἀφόρ-
μικτος, αὐονὰ βροτοῖς. (*Eu.* 328-333)

Over our victim's head,
this is the song we sing,
this is the maddening song,
the raging song of fear
that twists the brain, that binds it,
the lyre-shunning song
of the Erinyes, draining,
withering life away, (*Eu.* 328-333 / *Eu.* 385-392[11] trans. Shapiro and Burian)

Although the Erinyes clearly define the theme of their song, and do not deviate from it as the scene continues, the structure of the song itself is anything but clear or unified. Rather, the metrical form of the song is characterized by a series of stops and starts; they sing in one meter and then discard it for another.[12] Further, while it seems that the second and third mesodes could quite naturally have been ephymnia (following on the first ephymnion), the manuscript tradition does not lend much support to such an emendation.[13] We have no direct evidence of how this piece might have been choreographed, but it seems likely that the Erinyes danced as a group, possibly in a circle around Orestes.[14] This combination of both unified and chaotic elements would

[11] Cf. above n. 1.
[12] For a full metrical analysis of the Binding Song, as well as a discussion of its form, see W. C. Scott (1984:118ff).
[13] Cf. *ibid*. p.119; 122. For examples of editors who make this ementation in order to present a more tuneful and orderly Binding Song, see Aeschylus (1908: 59-71); Aeschylus (1933:140-142) (NB: A. W. Verrall provided the translation of the Binding Song given in this text); Aeschylus (2003: 160-164, n. on ll. 307-96 (Greek line numeration) / on ll. 353-479 (their textual numbering)).
[14] Taplin (1977; 1978) holds that the Erinyes likely encircled Orestes, Sommerstein (1989) notes that the text does not explicity say Orestes is surrounded, and, finally, Ley (2007) is similarly cautious, suggesting that it could be more likely that Orestes is separated from the chorus rather than physically surrounded by it. For their respective discussions of the issue, see: O. Taplin (1977: 386 n. 1); O. Taplin (1978: 188 n. 6); Sommerstein (1989: 123); G. Ley. (2007: 42-43).

have, no doubt, been very jarring to the original audience, as it both references and defies the established structures and images of a dramatic chorus.

How, then, should we understand the different, seemingly contradictory elements of this song? The Erinyes' voices are united, but the song itself is disjointed, indeed, terrifying in its disorder (we need only imagine a chorus of fearsome Erinyes singing and dancing unpredictably around the stage). They proclaim that this melody is a curse to bind Orestes' mind, yet it seems to have no effect on him. Finally, they maintain that they are guardians of *dikē* but their view of Orestes' situation (and of *dikē* itself) is utterly one-dimensional and uncompromising. Some critics hold that these elements cannot be reconciled and serve to depict the Erinyes as terrifying specters from a former age who must be rejected. I believe, however, that they are meant to be reconciled, and that the key to understanding this challenging ode lies within the ode itself. If choral performances served to express and reinforce social ties and the identities grounded in and resulting from those ties, as we suggested earlier, then this ode also possesses a social context. Indeed, the Erinyes themselves address their exclusion from the new Olympian order after detailing their more ancient cosmic role,[15] observing:

> γιγνομέναισι λάχη τάδ' ἐφ' ἁμὶν ἐκράνθη:
> ἀθανάτων δ' ἀπέχειν χέρας, οὐδέ τις ἐστί
> συνδαίτωρ μετάκοινος:
> παλλεύκων δὲ πέπλων ἄκληρος ἄμοιρος ἐτύχθην (*Eu.* 347, 350-352)
> < >.
>
> (T)he high gods steer clear of us, and we of them.
> None of them would feast with us at the same table;
> we have no part in festivals where white robes are
> worn. (*Eu.* 347, 350-352 / *Eu.* 412-415[16] trans. Shapiro and Burian)

[15] Zeus has allowed them to maintain their customary role and responsibilities, recognizing that the Erinyes are his elders (just as Athena, his representative in this play, does at *Eu*. 847) but has yet to effectively integrate them into the divine-human web of reciprocal social relationships that characterizes the Olympian order.

[16] Cf. above n. 1.

Here the Erinyes describe the contradiction that lies at the heart of their identity; they do not participate in any of the reciprocal social relationships they have been charged to protect.[17] This, indeed, is at the root of the mystery surrounding the Erinyes in earlier texts, as they are liminal beings, they do not possess clear voices (and, following from that, identities) of their own. While Aeschylus granted them choral voices and a notional mother,[18] they remain socially isolated. As they are outside of the broader network of reciprocal social relationships that exists between the Olympians and humans, they lack a full appreciation or understanding of such relationships. For this reason, they are single-minded in the exercise of their duties and their conception of *dikē* is absolute. They have no part in the tangled loyalties that mark human (or, for that matter, Olympian) relationships, so they do not see the complexities of Orestes' situation. They are paradoxical creatures: goddesses who exist to uphold the integrity of fundamental boundaries and kin-relationships who seem to entirely lack a network of kin, apart from their mother Night, to whom they appeal both in the Binding Song and later on in the play, when they angrily protest Orestes' acquittal. Thus, it is hardly surprising when these divinites who lack membership in a larger community attempt a choral performance (a fundamental expression of community in fifth century Athens) and are unable to sing a well-structured, harmonious song.

[17] This is a direct result of their incomplete integration into the Olympian order (see above, n. 24).
[18] No earlier account of the Erinyes' origin locates them within a family -- Hesiod has them spring from the drops of blood shed by Ouranos' severed member (*Thg*. 180-187). Aeschylus' Erinyes call Night their mother, as, being part of a family helps to anthropomorphize them as well as to suggest that they are capable of functioning within a larger social unit.

**The Binding Song: On the Edges of *Mousikē***

Commenting on the Binding Song, W. C. Scott (1984: 123) states, "There is no reason why the Furies should be unable to sing a unified hymn, but they fail." Yet, how can this be, when choral performance is manifestly a communal activity? If song is to be shared, but the Erinyes' song is impossible to accompany, maddening, and, ultimately, isolating, bringing the victim into the same liminal space which the Erinyes themselves inhabit, then how could it take the form of a canonical hymn?

I submit that the Binding Song is unsettling because it is incomplete — incomplete because the Erinyes have not yet been fully integrated into any sort of larger society, human or divine, which Aeschylus directly implies is a necessary prerequisite to the creation of a balanced and harmonious choral performance, just as a reciprocal social relationship needs to be established between a human community and a god or gods before a successful sacrificial feast may be enjoyed by all.[19] Indeed, the text itself bears this out, for we note that after Athena, Zeus' Olympian representative,[20] invites the Erinyes to participate in just such a reciprocal social relationship with the Athenians, the Erinyes accept her offer and ask what sort of blessing she would advise them to *sing* — ἐφυμνῆσαι—(*Eu.* 902) upon the land. After receiving guidance from Athena, they then

[19] It is significant that scholars have identified both a corrupted song motif (see Haldane (1965: 38-39); Wilson and Taplin (1993: 171, 174) for example) and a corrupted sacrifice motif (see F. I. Zeitlin (1965: 463-464)) in the *Oresteia*. As communal song and communal sacrifice formed the foundations of Attic society, the links between these two motifs are deep indeed. The previous work on these subjects, however, focuses almost exclusively their literary and symbolic significance. I am currently formulating an analysis of these motifs grounded in the practical realities of the *polis*, which, I hope, will provide a fresh perspective on the manner in which Aeschylus uses them.

[20] Despite Apollo's claims to be Zeus' representative, it is Athena who takes on this role in *Eumenides*, for she not only behaves properly toward the Erinyes (also the servants of Zeus) and devises a solution to Orestes' dilemma, but she is also most directly associated with the power behind Zeus' authority cf. *Eu*. 826ff.

join together and sing a unified hymn of blessing upon the city (*Eu.* 916ff.).[21] They did not lack the power to bless before this point because they were a locus of malice, but rather because granting a blessing (in that social and religious system) is fundamentally a response to the sacrifice of a devotee or a recognition of a pre-existing relationship.[22] Thus, it is only after the Erinyes agree to Athena's offer of cultic honors in Athens and thereby establish a relationship with her city and its people, that these goddesses are able to sing a song of blessing. They never worked against order, it is just that as its ancient guardians they remained somehow outside of it until that point in the drama. The effect of the previously un-harmonious Erinyes literally changing their tune on stage[23] must have been just as surprising (and, perhaps, moving) as the Binding Song was unsettling, even terrifying. These two passages both balance one another and underscore the fundamentally communal nature of choral performance, something which, (understandably, if somewhat unfortunately, for the modern student or scholar) is only fully accessible in performance. For, as Easterling (2008: 235) observes: "[P]erformance [...] through manifold visible and audible symbols with a coherence of their own makes us simultaneously aware of the other kinds of ways in which meaning is being created."

The visible and audible hallmarks of the Erinyes' choral performances clearly reference the genre itself (whether in part, as in the Binding Song, or wholly, as when they bless Athens). These, in turn, have as their context the unique blend of *polis* and

[21] Cf. also Scott (1984: 132-133).
[22] For more on the fundamentally reciprocal nature of Greek religion, see R. Parker (1998: 105-125).
[23] In Koun's 1982 production of the *Oresteia*, we hear the Erinyes (who have been singing) exchange discord for harmony at this point in the play and begin to move in a group as they do so. They also remove their grotesque masks, to reveal beautiful female faces (although that is certainly a modern touch, as Athena references the Erinyes 'fearful faces' at *Eu.* 990). The scene is quite powerful.

performance culture that defined fifth-century Athens, a culture which recognized the essential importance of community and communal expression.

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