THE POWER OF THE SPEECH ACT:
AESCHYLUS’ FURIES AND THEIR BINDING SONG

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μούσαν στυγεράν ἀποφαίνεσθαι
(Eum. 308-9)

The unprecedented appearance of the Furies on stage in Aeschylus’ Eumenides is a theatrical event which defies all description. It is a spectacle so terrible to tell and terrible to see (δεινὰ λέξαι, δεινὰ δ’ ὀφθαλμοῖς δρακεῖν, 34) that the language of the Pythian priestess seems to break down. Up to line 45 the Pythia’s speech is clear (τῇ δὲ γὰρ τρανῶς ἔρω), but at line 46 it becomes contradictory and confused (46-52):

πρόσθεν δὲ τά νόρμα τοῦδε θαυμαστὸς λόγος
eüdei γυναικῶν ἐν βρόντοις ἡμένος.
οὔτε γυναῖκας ἀλλὰ Γοργόνας λέγω
οὔδ’ αὖτε Γοργείουσιν εἰκάσω τύπους
[...
εἴδον ποτ’ ἤδη Φινέως γεγραμμένας
dεῖπνον φεροῦσας’ ἀπτεροὶ γε μὴν ἴδεῖν
αὐταῖ μέλαιναι τ’, ἐς τὸ πάν βδελύκτροποι...

... an eye-opening horde
of women lies asleep in the shrine.
No, not women, but Gorgons, I would say —
but no, not like typical Gorgons, either . . .
I saw hags like that in a picture once

plundering the feast of Phineas,
but these are wingless, so to see,
and black as pitch, and totally revolting . . .

In this rhetorical anacoluthon the Pythia tries to describe the Furies in terms of pictorial representation, but fails. Unable to believe her own eyes, she can only say what the Furies are not: not women, nor Gorgons, nor Harpies. Her persistent reiteration of negatives suggests they are monstrous in the literal sense of the word, demonstrating something outside conventional visual categories, something darker (52), something that repels vision (53-54), something not fit to be seen (55-56), in fact, something she has never seen anywhere in the world (57-59). Apollo has a similar response when he first sees the Furies (69-70), and even Athena is at a loss for words (410-12):

όμωλαι δ' ούθενι σπαρτών γένει,
οὔτ' ἐν θεαίσι πρὸς θεῶν ὑπόμεναι,
οὔτ' ὁδ' ὑπὸ βροτείους ἐμφερεῖς μορφώμασιν.

You are like no seed ever sown,
not seen among the goddesses by gods,
nor are you like anything human in form.

Like the Pythia, she can only describe the Furies by a negation of vision; they represent the unrepresentable.

Indeed, throughout the Oresteia, the Furies are emphatically invisible: the chorus of the Agamemnon is bewildered by Cassandra’s vision of Erinys hovering over the house of Atreus and singing a song of destruction (Ag. 1189-92), and Orestes’ glimpse of the Furies similarly excludes the chorus: “You do not see them, but I do” (ὑμεῖς μὲν ὠχὼ ὑπάτε τάσοτε’, ἐγὼ δ’ ὑπὼ, Choc. 1061). Both times the audience, by analogy to the unseeing chorus, must accept the paradox of the Furies as a sight not to be seen. Their function is rather to obscure sight: as daughters of night (321-22), they are repeatedly

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1 Unless otherwise specified, line numbers refer to D. L. Page’s edition (1972) of the Eumenides; translations are my own. I am grateful to Froma Zeitlin for encouragement and comments on an earlier version of this essay.
associated with darkness, obscurity, and shadows. They describe themselves living below the earth in sunless gloom (οὐδ’ ἡδυνα τάξιν ἔχουσα καὶ δυσήλων κυνέφασ, 395-96), and are known to turn their victims to shadow and drag them down to this invisible world as well (τιθετον, ἀμάντρων, ἐν δ’ ἀδίκητος τελέθους, Αγ. 466-67). Shrouded in black (φαλοχίτων, Χοε. 1049), the Furies claim to take no part in the bright costumes of festivals (352): they belong not to the theater, but to Hades (Ἀδης), a place that is by its very definition “unseen” (ἀ-ιδής). Thus the Furies invoke as their divine witness Hades “with the deltographic mind” (δελτογράφων φρενι, 275), a curious phrase that resonates not only with the Pythia’s pictorial description of the Furies (εἴδον ποτ’ ἄδη Φυνέως γεγραμένως, 50), but also recalls the comparison of Iphigenia to a picture at the moment of her death (πρέπον ὑπά τ’ ὀν ἐν γραφαῖς, Αγ. 242-43), and Cassandra’s description of herself as a picture before leaving the stage to meet her death (σπόγγος ὀλέσσει γραφήν, Αγ. 1329). In each case, death is associated with static pictorial representation, as opposed to the life dramatically represented on stage. It would seem that theatrical conventions, the conventions of seeing in the theater, do not apply to the Furies. And yet, despite their anti-theatrical nature, the Furies are introduced in the Eumenides with explicitly visual language: the Pythia calls them θαυμαστος (46), and Athena also refers to them as a θαυμα δ’ ἐγγραμον πάρσα (407). Both θαυμαστος and θαυμα are etymologically linked to the verb θαυμάω, “to see.” In Homeric usage, a θαυμα refers to something that causes wonder when it is seen (the Shield of Achilles, for example, is a θαυμα ἰδέσθαι); by the time of Aeschylus it refers more generally to any kind of marvel. But in the context of the theater (θεάτρον), where θέατρον implies a very particular kind of viewing, the θαυμα of the Furies emphasizes the fact that they have never yet been seen by any spectator in any theater. As Cassandra’s

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2 In fifth-century Athens, θέαμα is increasingly associated with spectatorship at public events, such as games, trials, and theatrical performances. Liddell and Scott define it first as “to gaze at, behold, mostly with a sense of wonder,” and second, “to view as spectators, especially in the theatre.” A detailed historical survey of the verb’s development from the first to the second meaning, and its relationship to θαυμα, is beyond the scope of this essay, but would certainly make a welcome study.

For the etymological connection between θεάμα and θείμα, see Pierre Chantraine, Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque (Paris 1968). For the semantic relationship between θεάμα and θείμα, see Mette, Glosa 39 (1961): 49-70.
visionary chorus (a dissonant χορός ἔμφυτος ὁυκ ἐνναος, Ag. 1186-93) turns into a visible chorus singing and dancing on stage, Aeschylus prepares his audience for a new kind of theatrical vision.

My essay will trace this gradual visualization of the Furies as dramatic chorus from their first entrance to the binding song, which is their first real choral ode. The interpretation I propose is an attempt to mediate between "text" and "stage" oriented approaches to Greek tragedy. The shortcoming of the first approach is that it is reluctant to see Greek tragedy as script for performance, while the second approach sees tragedy only as script for performance. But as David Wiles argues in "Reading Greek Performance" (1987.136-51) this is a false opposition, for like words on the page, actions on stage must also be "read" by the spectators according to established codes. Neither word nor deed has primacy; drama is rather about the conjunction of the two. Wiles therefore calls for a way of reading Greek drama that reflects more generally on the semiotics of performance. "What critics all too rarely attempt," he writes, "is to investigate how meaning is created not for a reader but for a spectator in the theatre, where verbal and visual signifiers are organized into a single coherent system" (149). The Furies are an excellent test case for such a critical attempt, precisely because the verbal and visual components of their being are "organized" before the very eyes of the spectators. Whereas the Furies are purely verbal creations earlier in the Oresteia, their actual presence in the theater now becomes a function of the audience's awareness of itself as spectators, witnessing the dramatic transformation of what they hear into what they see. My analysis does not insist on any particular staging for this transformation, but rather asks what it might mean to an Athenian audience to see the Furies on stage at all. I will argue that the Furies are meant to be seen as the incarnation of speech acts, which places them on another level of representation than the other

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3 Wiles therefore suggests that we conceive of the performance as text: "A performance, I repeat, is itself a 'text.' A text can be regarded as a sequence of signifiers. A signified can only be attached to a signifier — that is, meaning can only be created — when the signifiers are perceived as part of a coherent system of differences. The reader encounters a system of visual signifiers, the listener a system of phonic signifiers. The spectators in the theatre encounter both phonic and visual signifiers simultaneously. This kind of semiological terminology seems to me to offer the clearest way of describing how meaning is created for and by those who read or watch plays" (146-47).
actors, both human and divine, in the trilogy. Of course this is not to say that only the Furies are associated with performative language: various critics have explored the peculiar relationship between language and action in the Oresteia and other plays by Aeschylus, and found that it is a recurrent and even defining feature of Aeschylean dramaturgy. But the Furies do not merely give us examples of performative utterance; they uniquely exemplify the way performative language works. I would therefore suggest that the Eumenides, often described as the least “dramatic” of the trilogy, gives insight into the very conditions of dramatic representation: first, by making the audience reflect on the Furies' emergence into the theater, and second, by presenting their binding song as example of the performative power of language which makes drama possible.

A. L. Brown (1983.13-34) has commented on a shift in representation at the beginning of the Eumenides; he argues that the Pythia’s prologue functions as a transition between two levels of reality, so that the Furies may be realistically anthropomorphised. However, the Pythia’s prologue is only the first step in a gradual emergence of the Furies into drama: although she first describes them sleeping around Orestes as if they were a static picture, Clytemnestra is the one who actuallyakens the Furies from this pictorial stasis. The exact moment of their entry is therefore an important question. Brown prefers the Furies to appear directly after the Pythia’s speech at line 63, since what follows seems to him “unplayable if the Furies are still concealed” (1982.26). He dismisses Oliver Taplin’s suggestion that Clytemnestra might be standing in the doorway to address the Furies offstage as “an absurdly awkward device,” and altogether rejects the idea that it might be effective to play the whole scene behind the skene: “no staging device will be effective unless it means something” (1982.27). But perhaps the Furies’ invisibility does mean something: only after Clytemnestra’s speech can the audience actually see the Furies, for only she is able to mediate between what is seen and what is not seen. Despite her powerful stage presence, Clytemnestra is now

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5 Cf. Rosenmeyer (1982.167): “It is generally felt that by comparison with the other two plays of the trilogy, Eumenides is a drama diminished in pathos and suffering.”
an ἐκδομαν, a mere image of an actress momentarily projected out of the two-dimensional realm of Hades and into the three-dimensional theater. Standing in (or just behind) the doorway, she hovers ambiguously on the threshold of dramatic representation and presides over the Furies’ entrance into the drama: first she calls them into being as actors, then she sends them out of the pre-theatrical space behind the skene and into the theater. Language necessarily precedes the appearance of the Furies because they are the visualization of Clytemnestra’s words; prompted by her, they enact an elaborate process of articulation, gradually developing from inarticulate groans (μνημός, 117) and a repetition of sounds (λαβί, λαβί, λαβί, λαβί, 130) and phrases (ἐπιθαμεν φίλων ἡ πολλὰ δὴ παθοῦσα . . . ἐπιθαμεν πάθος, 143-45), into full-fledged actors able to speak and argue for themselves. Thus Aeschylus presents his chorus to the audience in a distinct progression from hearing to seeing: first the Pythia describes what we cannot yet see, next we hear the Furies muttering offstage in response to Clytemnestra, and only then do we actually see them.6

We may therefore accept Taplin’s proposal (1977.369-74) that the Furies are hidden from view until line 140. But again, the actual staging is not so much in question here, for even if the Furies are already on stage at the start of the play, or, as Brown suggests, revealed sleeping on an ekkyklema at line 64, there would still be the effect of a static image coming to life, as they awaken one by one in response to Clytemnestra’s call and begin to move. No matter how the scene is played, this highly unconventional choral introduction presents the Furies’ transition from pictorial to dramatic representation. The transition is further dramatized by a double parados: while the first entrance of the Furies is mediated by Clytemnestra through the skene, the second is a proper entrance through the eisodos. Taplin observes the scenic reduplication, but prefers to interpret it in terms of dramatic naturalism: the delayed entry at line 140 serves “to make the Erinyes as horrible and alarming as possible” (371) and the repeated entry at line 244 “brings out the relentlessness of the Erinyes’ pursuit” (380).7

6 Loraux (1988.93-107) also emphasizes the role played by Clytemnestra in making the Furies visible, and discusses more generally how the Furies become a metaphor for the activity of the spectator.

7 Taplin does not further develop the theatrical implications of these staging devices; indeed, he firmly argues against the creation of a self-conscious spectator in tragedy.
But these entrances also serve to obtrude the conventions of dramatic representation, as the Furies are transformed from unrepresentable beings into actors represented on stage: when the Furies enter in their second parodos, the audience is prepared to see them as a conventional dramatic chorus. Their previously figurative attributes have now become literal: their dark robes are a visualization of the epithet κελαπενια; their serpentine appearance brings to life the snake metaphors throughout the Oresteia; their barking pursuit of Orestes dramatizes the recurrent hunting imagery; and the song and dance in their first choral ode enacts the fear “ready to sing and dance” within Orestes’ heart (προς δε καρδιακα φοβος αδελων ετοιμος ηδι’ αποφαινεσθαι κοτωλ, Choe. 1024-25). In fact, the binding song is the final step in the gradual visualization of the Furies, because here they make themselves fully visible (307-09):

ἀφε δη καη χορον ἄψωμεν, ἐπεὶ
μοῦσαι στυγερὰν
ἀποφαινεσθαι δεδοκηκεν . . .

“Come let us form a chorus,” they sing, “since it is time to make our powerful music visible.” The conflation of hearing and seeing in the phrase μοῦσαι στυγερὰν ἀποφαινεσθαι suggests that their song is a visual revelation of their verbal being, and in this simultaneity lies their unique power as chorus.

The μοῦσαι στυγερὰ of the Furies reveals itself as a very special kind of music: as they assume the role of dramatic chorus in the binding song, they demonstrate the way drama can visualize language as action. It becomes clear that the Furies are not merely an example of how the figurative turns literal in the Oresteia; rather, they are the very source of this continual linguistic transformation. Their language has the peculiar power of being self-fulfilling, and the binding song is the most striking example of this: it may be described, according to J.

because it would disrupt the dramatic illusion: “To be effective (tragedy) demands the total concentration of the audience, intellectual and emotional. Explicit self-reference breaks that spell” (1986.171). This appeal to dramatic naturalism, like A. L. Brown’s insistence on Aeschylean “realism” (1983.20), precludes the possibility that the opening scenes of the Eumenides derive their tremendous theatrical impact from the audience’s awareness of being in the theater.
L. Austin’s definition of performative utterances, as a speech act whose function is not to describe but to carry out a performance. A performative is a particular use of language “in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something” (1962.12). Austin is quick to exclude dramatic utterances from his analysis of performatives, because acting on stage is different from action off-stage; for example, we must distinguish between a marriage vow uttered in church or in a theater. However, this distinction has been called into question by a number of literary critics who turn Austin’s theory to their own purposes. Thus Mary Louise Pratt (1977) argues against the “poetic language fallacy” and undertakes to describe literary utterances in the same terms as other utterances, and Barbara Johnson (1980.52-66) furthermore suggests that it is impossible to distinguish theatrical performatives from “true” performatives because the conventionality of a performative utterance automatically fictionalizes its utterer; she also points out that Austin’s theory of speech acts is derived from the very theatricality it denies. Even Austin himself realizes in the course of his lectures that all language can be seen as either explicitly or implicitly performative, which leads him to abandon his original distinction between performative and constative utterances. Shoshana Felman (1983) takes this observation one step further: in her book on literary speech acts, Austin becomes a figure for the self-subversive potential of the performative, which undoes the opposition between referentiality and self-referentiality. The Furies may be interpreted along similar lines: their words are deeds performed in the very moment of utterance, deeds which undo the opposition between “play” acting and “real” action. I will return to the problem of referentiality later in the essay; for the time being, I would like to consider how the binding song of the Furies refers to its own enactment.

From the moment the Furies join hands, every saying becomes a form of doing. They begin to sing the stage directions for their own dance, in which verbs of motion increasingly refer to their own physical

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8 “A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. . . . Language in such circumstances is in special ways — intelligibly — used not seriously” (22).
movements, steering men straight (ἐπινομαλί, 311), creeping up on offenders (ἐφέρ πετει, 314), moving quickly (σπευδόμεναι, 360), leaping upward (ἄλομένα, 372), and jumping downward (καταφέρω, 373). The insistent repetition of ἔπι throughout the ode also has a deictic function: the preposition seems to refer to the actual position of the Furies as they perform the ode. For example, in line 357 they describe themselves closing in on their victim (ἔπι τῶν) even as they now close in on Orestes, and similarly in line 378 the darkness that hovers over a guilty man (τῶν ἐπί κνήφας ἀνδρὶ μύσος πεπότατο) could well be a description of the Furies themselves hovering over Orestes in their dark robes. Thus the language of the Furies closes in around their victim, not just figuratively, but literally (328-33):

| ἔπι δὲ τῶν τεθυμένων | Over the one now to be burned |
| τὸδὲ μέλος, παρακοπᾶ | This melody, striking him mad |
| παραφράει φρένος ἀλήθης, | Out of his mind, pounding his brain |
| ὑμῖν ἐξ ἔρμυνων | Hymn of the Furies |
| δέσμιος φρένων, ἀφόρ- | Binding minds, without a lyre, |
| μάουσ, ἀφόρος βρότος | Sucking men dry. |

The strophe does exactly what it says. Beginning again with ἔπι, it is ingeniously constructed as a series of oppositions, so that the cumulative weight of “this melody” (τὸδὲ μέλος) bears down upon (ἔπι) Orestes, both rhythmically and syntactically. The binding song builds up to the very words which describe it: the pacons create a crescendo which culminates in ὑμῖν and δέσμιος, the moment of binding. This kind of demonstrative language creates a simultaneity of cause and effect: δέσμιος φρένων is a self-fulfilling phrase that signifies both the act of binding (when read as subjective genitive) and the state of being

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9 Although ἔπι is a common preposition, it occurs with unusual frequency in the binding song: 311, 314, 317, 328, 335, (341), 349, 357, 361, 370, 371, 378, 393.

10 If we accept ἔπι τῶν ἄρ ἔμενα as an alternate reading of line 357, the phrase is even more emphatically demonstrative; Groeneboom (1952.146) argues that it could serve as an apt stage direction for the chorus while they take a menacing step toward Orestes: “rushing upon that man just like this.” However, it must be added that this line is identified by Page as a “lectio incertissima.”
bound (when read as objective genitive), and the compound adjective ϕερνοδαλής refers both to the destructive mind of the Furies (when read actively) or the destroyed mind of their victim (when read passively). As Anne Lebeck (1971.54-56) observes, the doubleness of reference throughout the binding song serves to bind the Furies and Orestes, subject and object, in “a tangle of words.” And so, much as Agamemnon was trapped in the net of the Furies (ψαφντοῖς ἕντο μὲν Ἀρνύνοις, Ag. 1580), Orestes becomes hopelessly entangled in the net of their language.

Of course, unlike Clytemnestra’s net, the Furies’ song is a purely verbal structure, but it nevertheless has a physical effect on Orestes by asserting the materiality of language. Unaccompanied by the Apollonian lyre, the Furies create a ritualistic music which sounds like a magical chant: the assonance of ματέρ α' ματέρ, ἔτικτες, δι ματέρ Νύξ (321-22), the tongue-twisting alliteration of παρακοπα, παραφορα, ψενοδαλής (329-30; 342-43), the pounding pacons, and the repetition of refrains all serve to transform the choral ode into a ritual incantation, like “abracadabra.”11 The rhythms of the ode also contribute to this incantatory effect. Although William C. Scott’s analysis of choral odes in the Oresteia (1984.120) dismisses the metrical structure of the binding song as “desultory,” the meters prove to be an important part of its meaning. For example, the choral invocation beginning in line 307 enacts the formation of a chorus line in appropriately “marching” anapests, in which the occasional substitution of spondees stresses the linking of hands and the opening notes of music: αγε δη καί χορόν αψωμένε, ἐπει μονήσαν στυγεράν ἀποφαινέσθαι δεδοκικέον ... (307-9). The meter has a similar mimetic function in line 326, when the chorus modulates into trochees (later known as the “running meter,” from τροχαίος) in order to dramatize themselves hunting Orestes like a hare. As they accelerate, the fast trochaic rhythm (— — —) is syncopated into crotics (— — —), and further resolved into pacons

11 Groeneboom associates the a-sounds in the invocation that opens the binding song with the deep tones of the aulos, the instrument that traditionally accompanies ritual chant (141), and compares the Furies’ incantatory refrains to ancient prayers like ὸον τοῦ θεοῦ, τε κεῖ, and so on (143). Although there is some debate whether the ephymnia should be repeated as refrains, even without repetition the recurring paeanic rhythms in ephymnia α (328-33), ephymnia β (354-59) and ephymnia γ (372-76) create the effect of a ritualistic chant.
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(― —― ). In this relentless subdivision of tempo, the song acquires an independent momentum, and the spell begins to take effect. As in possession rituals, the music and dance of the Furies seem to induce a trance in Orestes: he does not speak, at any rate, until Athena intervenes in his behalf. In this way the Furies assert their primordial musical power over Orestes, surrounding him with sound; their song is an ancient rite which undoes the distinction between words and things.

Indeed, for the Furies, words are things. This is the law of their being, the θεσμός which they reclaim at the end of their song: "What mortal does not feel awe and fear when he hears my ritual (ἐμοὶ κλών θεσμόν), fated by the gods and now fulfilled?" (389-93). Here the audience is indirectly asked to recognize the binding song as a performative utterance, a prime example of "how to do things with words." Derived from the verb τίθημι, a θεσμός is a literal allocation or "placing" of power; it refers not only to the Furies' right to sing, but also to the song itself, placed in the theater as a reified ritual utterance. The spectators learn to "see" language in action, as the words of the Furies are simultaneously fated and fulfilled (τὸν μορφόκραντον... δοθήτα τέλεον) in the act of being performed on stage. The binding song is therefore presented to the audience as a form of μοσθος, a word already associated with performative speech in Homeric poetry, and applied specifically to the Furies in this play; they are identified with μοσθος rather than λόγος (582, 1021). However, the Furies are not merely the speakers of μοσθος; after the binding song is finished, they identify themselves to Athena as the very incarnation of such speech acts. When she asks who they are, the name they give is not Erinyes but Arai: "Curses we are called" ('Αραι... κεκλημέθα, 417). Athena responds in turn: "Yes, now I know your race, and eponymous names" (γένος μὲν οίδα κληρίδας τ' επωνύμους, 418). The use of the word κληρίδων here is significant; it generally refers to an ominous utterance,

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12 For a discussion of such musical rituals in ancient Greece see Rouget (1985), especially chapter 5, which argues against attributing trance to "a more or less inexplicable power sui generis in music" and suggests instead that trance music is powerful insofar as it is associated with (i.e., a sign of) a particular deity (240). This is true of the Furies, whose binding song is not simply a display of musical power but an act of naming themselves as the source of that power. Lain Entralgo (1970) also discusses the importance of Greek incantations and magical charms.

13 See Martin 1989. chapter 1.
which may take the form of a fateful name or a word spoken with unlucky consequences. Peradotto (1969.1-21) has demonstrated the manipulation of such ominous utterances in the *Agamemnon* and the *Choephoroi*, and traces the power of κακίδωνες to the cledonomantic belief that words have a magical effect on things. But in the *Eumenides* the Furies represent cledonomancy in its most immediate and powerful form: their very existence is predicated on the understanding of words as omens. Not only is their curse of Orestes a κακίδωνες, but even their names are κακίδωνες ἐπέφυσμοι; they are Curses who perform the meaning of their own name.

Thus in the binding song, the audience sees a curse both enacted and embodied. As the Furies sing and dance on stage, there is a curious conflation of body and song. We have seen how the language and rhythm of the ode dramatize the physical movements of the chorus, but gradually the ode also seems to thematize its own metrical scheme. The dancing feet of the chorus are measured like metrical feet: ὀρχησμοῖς τ' ἐπεφύσμοις ποδός (371). By hypallage the adjective is transferred to ὀρχησμοῖς, as if it is not the foot itself which is vindictive, but the rhythm of the foot. This exchange between parts of the song and parts of the body is contained already within the word μέλος which signifies both “melody” and “limb.”14 The double entendre of τόδε μέλος in line 329 becomes even more obvious in the third *epheymion*, where the melody is literally embodied (372-76):

μέλικα γαρ οὖν ἄλομενά — Leaping up high, high in the air,
ἀλάκηθεν βαρύτετη — And from above falling down hard,
καταφέρο τόδος ἄκμαν — I press down hard the edge of my foot,
σφάλερα [καλύ] ταυνηθρόμοις — Tripping the legs of those who run fast,
κῶλα, δύσφορον ἀπαν — A terrible fall.

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14 My rhythmic analysis uses established metrical terminology simply as a matter of convenience, and with full awareness that these terms may not have been in use at the time of Aeschylus. I do not wish to generalize about the significance of certain meters, nor do I intend to describe or prescribe particular dance steps based merely on the song as it is preserved in the text. I merely want to point out how this ode, in this specific context, creates the effect of equating song with body. For a more detailed discussion of the homology poem-body which is later formalized in colometry, see Jesper Svenbro (1984.215-32).
The song is here anatomized into rhythmical units: πόδες and κώλα refer not only to the feet and legs of the Furies jumping up and down, but also to the paeanic κώλα themselves as a "tripping" meter that leaps up in three short skips and lands hard on the ictus of the foot: πόδες ἀκμαῖν. This emphasis on the last syllable both represents and is the foot coming down. Other paean also create the very effect they describe: the lift of ἀλωμένω and ἔνδεκαθεν, the heavy stress on βαρύντησε and καταφέρω, and the end-stopped speed of ταύνδρομος. The refrain thus runs along in σφαλερά κώλα that are literal and transitive (causing victims of the Furies to trip), as well as figurative and intrinsically (expressing the tripping rhythm of the Furies themselves). Indeed the chant seems to run toward its own fall: the final pherecratean line dislocates the paeanic system, as if the chant can only be completed by tripping over itself. The total confusion of literal and figurative meanings in this maddeningly mimetic meter finally leads to ἀτη, the last word of the refrain.

Paean are in fact associated with ἀτη throughout the Oresteia. Aside from the binding song, this distinctive meter occurs only twice in the trilogy: when Agamemnon walks on Clytemnestra's carpet, the paeanic rhythm of μαλα γε τοι (Ag. 1001) and το δ ζε τι γαν (Ag. 1017) anticipates the language of the binding song (especially μαλα γαρ σοι in 372 and ζε τοι in 341); and when Orestes crosses Clytemnestra's threshold, paean introduce the word ἀτη three times (825, 830, 836), much as the binding song leads up to ἀτη by means of the same meter.17 The familial transgression within the House of

15 There are a few instances of single, unrepeated paean that do not form a metrical pattern: Ag. 1134, 1461, 1473; Choe. 153; Eum. 271. The resolved dochimiacs in Ag. 159 and 165 also sound like paean, but again are not consistent enough to be of interest to the argument here.

16 Thomson (1929.130-31) also observes that in lines 329-34 of the binding song "the music of the Agamemnon echoes in our ears (1004-5)" and surmises: "Thus the rhythm which marked the climax of the Agamemnon and the Choeophoros now marks the climax of the whole trilogy — the most tremendous scene in Greek tragedy." He even suggests that a sort of Wagnerian leitmotiv is at work in the Oresteia, associating the Furies with a particular musical theme.

17 Paean also occur at line 807-8 of the same stasimon (783-837), with reference to an unnamed god inhabiting a hidden cave. Garvie (1986.263) argues that "the god addressed must be Apollo," because "the paeanic meter is particularly appropriate to Apollo." However, in the Oresteia, paean are never associated with Apollo, but only with ἀτη and the Furies as the agents of ἀτη. The suggestion that the god
Atreus takes the form of a literal misstep, represented rhythmically through pacons. Furthermore, as the relentless rhythm of feet in the binding song avenges one misstep with another, the Furies are transformed into agents of ἀτη. Thus Aeschylus brings to life Agamemnon’s personification of “Ἀτη in the Iliad (19.92-94):

. . . τῇ μὲν θ’ ἀπαλοὶ πόδες, οὐ γὰρ ἐπ’ οὐδεὶς
πᾶλαι ταῖς, ἄλλ’ ἄρα ἢ γε κατ’ ἄνθρωπον κράτα βαίνει
βλάπτονος ἄνθρωπος. κατὰ δ’ οὖν ἔτερον γε πέδησε.

Soft feet she has, for she never touches ground, but steps down on heads of men to craze them, and binds them one by one.

In Aeschylus’ drama, the Furies are no longer personifications of this mental state, but dramatic actors who perform ἀτη as an actual dance. However, as the Furies step out of Homeric narrative and into Aeschylean drama, they can no longer be described as coming down on men and never touching ground: while the song describes their feet trampling Orestes, their dance shows them setting foot on stage. This discrepancy is inherent in performative language, which produces itself as its own reference yet also presents itself as an action. According to Shoshana Felman, speech acts must therefore be read in terms of an inevitable failure: the stable reference or “ground” of constative language disappears, as performative language opens up a “space” of referentiality where the speaker inevitably slips and falls short of himself. The Eumenides ends in a similar slippage, for despite the spectacular power of the binding song, Orestes is not bound. The Furies dramatize the problematic function of performative utterance; they fall short of themselves in the binding song because, as Felman suggests, “the very performance of the performative consists precisely in performing the loss of footing” (64). Thus what Felman sees as a particular textual move is here actualized in the very actions attributed to Furies: they make people stumble and fall, but they themselves are also metaphorically tripped up by their own language. For example, by

being addressed is Hades seems more appropriate for the context and also establishes, once more, the connection between the Furies and Hades.
describing Orestes as a bloodless sacrifice (302) not slaughtered at the altar (305), the Furies unwittingly prevent themselves from taking him as a true sacrifice, and by describing themselves as σεμνοί (383) they unknowingly anticipate the eventual worship of themselves as holy goddesses in Athens. The "unlucky double reference" (13) which according to Peradotto characterizes cledonomancy thus turns into a lucky double reference: while ominous utterances are used to destroy the speaker earlier in the Oresteia, in the Eumenides the ominous words of the Furies prove to be good omens. Following Peradotto's argument, Rabel (1979.16-21) offers several further examples of this kind of linguistic reversal: he observes that in line 299 the Furies tell Orestes that neither Apollo nor the strength of Athena can save him, which could be interpreted to mean that not the strength but the persuasion of Athena will be the saving grace. Similarly, when the Furies boast in line 384 that they are "hard for mortals to persuade," they leave open the possibility that they might be persuaded by an immortal like Athena. This figurative misstep enables Athena to step into their place: just before the binding song, Athena is described as a motionless statue "holding its foot either up or covered" (τῆθησθων ὄρθων ἣ κατηρεῳ τόδα, 294), but after numerous references to moving feet in the song, she is seen hurrying on stage "with a tireless foot" (διώκουσα... ἀτρυστον τὸδα, 403). By literally stepping into the referential gap left open by the Furies, Athena is able to reinterpret their words. Her timely intervention demonstrates that a performative utterance may be a binding promise as well as a binding curse, and introduces a new form of cledonomancy to the Oresteia.

In this way the binding song both is and is not fulfilled. What, then, does it mean, and should the audience take it seriously? Aegisthus poses a similar question toward the end of the Choephori, when he asks the chorus (845-46):

πῶς ταύτ' ἀληθῆ καὶ βλέποντα δοξάσω;
ἡ πρός γυναικῶν δειματούμενοι λόγοι
πεδάρσιοι θρώσκουσι, θυμίσκοντες μάτην;

"How shall I decide," Aegisthus wants to know, "whether this is true and real before my eyes? Or is it only the terrified words of women, words that leap high up in the air and then die down in vain?"
context of the *Choephoroi*, the question refers to rumors that Orestes is
dead; but in the larger context of the *Oresteia*, the question becomes
paradigmatic for the audience’s response to what they see and hear on
stage. Perhaps the binding song is nothing more than words leaping up
and down in vain; perhaps the failure of the Furies’ performative
utterance demonstrates that their primitive μόθος must give way to
more sophisticated forms of language, such as Apollo’s λόγος or
Athena’s πειθό. This is how the *Eumenides* is traditionally viewed.
However, I have suggested that the Furies must be “seen” on another
level of representation: even if they do not succeed in cursing Orestes,
they do successfully name themselves as Curses, and are recognized as
such by Athena. Her prolonged attempt to persuade the Furies to stay
in Athens (in a kommos which dominates the second half of the play)
suggests that the city somehow depends on their μόθος στυγερά. For
what is the speech act but the possibility of theater, where the polis
sees itself represented in the simultaneity of word and deed? The
Furies present to the Athenian audience the very process of representa-
tion, which enables the foundation of political institutions such as
theaters and courts. Thus in Aeschylus’ etiology of the Areopagus, the
λόγος of law is necessarily implicated in the μόθος of the Furies.18
Although they may have lost their footing figuratively in the binding
song, the Furies literally set foot on solid Athenian soil in their exodos.
And that demonstrates the continuing power of the speech act.

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18 In an anthropological approach to the binding song, Faraone (1985.150-54) also
concludes the language of ritual is implicated in the language of law: he argues that
the song enacts the common practice of judicial cursing before an important trial,
thus demonstrating that “curse and court were thought to have evolved simulta-
neously.” Whether this was in fact a “simultaneous” evolution is another question;
suffice it to say that Aeschylus chooses to present it as such in order to represent the
civic ideology.
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