

On Common Ground 2: Continuity and Change

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**STRANGE AND FANTASTIC MOTIONS:
WITCHES AND FURIES IN THEATRE DANCE**

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WITCHES OR FURIES?

The springboard for this paper was a puzzle posed by Ben Jonson in the characterisation of the Dame in **The Masque of Queens** 1609:

*At this the Dame entered to them, naked armed, barefooted, her frock tucked, her hair knotted and folded with vipers: in her hand a torch made of a dead man's arm, lighted; girded with a snake.*¹

On the face of it this is the leader of a group of hags similar to Shakespeare's Wierd Sisters, but the addition of snakes and torch renders the figure more like a fury. Thus this is a representation in words of the Furies sketched by Inigo Jones, considered to be designs for antimasque characters in **Salmacida Spolia** 1640.² Was this mingling of the traditional hag-witch with the fury a common feature of the stage representation of witches? The juxtaposition of witches and furies in **Dido and Aeneas** 1689 seemed to indicate a tendency to do so. An investigation of the stage witch and the fury might clarify the matter. It might also lead to a better understanding of grotesque dancing in general and the antimasque of the Stuart Court in particular.

This paper is very much an initial reconnoitre of the territory, using secondary sources across four centuries and encompassing visual, verbal and musical evidence. Thus it is a simple presentation of some sightings of these grotesque characters across time. The assistance of experts in each period and genre will be needed to understand the material further, and investigation into primary sources is very necessary.

Distinctive Entities

An early result of the investigation was to discover that Jonson is atypical in adding the attributes of a fury to the portrayal of a witch. Thus witches and furies are separate entities on the stage, even if some features are shared amongst demonic characters. A later result was to discover that the evidence produced by even this limited study was too large to present in a short paper. Thus, the study of witches has been set aside, in order to present a coherent account of furies.

FURIES

While the concept of witches is a product of European folklore, the notion of Furies descends from classical mythology. Called the Erinyes in Greek, the Furiae in Latin, they dwell in the underworld, returning to earth to exact revenge for crimes perpetrated by men. Like the Fates, they are three: Tisiphone (voice of revenge), Megaera (envious anger) and Alecto (the never ending). They are also ironically and euphemistically known as the Eumenides: the kindly ones, because they mete out impartial justice. They were female, dressed as huntresses, carrying instruments of torture, such as scourges, sickles



Furies

(costume design by Inigo Jones for *Salmacida Spolia* 1640)

Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth

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Headdress for a Fury

(costume design by Inigo Jones for *Salmacida Spolia* 1640)

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or torches, and associated with Gorgon Medusa. The classical attributes were perpetuated in Renaissance literature: for example, Dante's **Inferno**:

*where in no time at all and all at once
sprang up three hellish Furies stained with blood,
their bodies and their gestures those of females
their waists were bound in cords of green hydras,
horned snakes and little snakes grew as hair,
and twined themselves around the savage temples.*³

These attributes were developed in the Italian Renaissance theatre. In the intermedii of the latter half of the sixteenth century, furies were presented wearing body suits to appear naked, with sagging breasts, both bloody and sooty. They have snakes entwined in their hair and girdling the waist and one arm. As well as bearing torches, they might also have wounds spitting flames. Masks may be worn to represent a screaming face. Symbols of night also occur, such as bat wings and cypress branches. Yet these examples⁴ were of musicians as furies, with their instruments disguised as serpents.

Furies in the seventeenth century

The first firm example of dancing furies is from the barriers of **Eros and Anteros** 1613, when twelve sooty furies created:

*un ballo assai stravagante*⁵

bearing torches. Once finished, they disappeared through a trap.

Three furies appeared in **Le Ballet de Tancrède** 1619, created for a wedding at the court of Louis XIII on a theme by Tasso. The costume design⁶ for one of the Eumenides shows the hair, girdle and bracelet of serpents, the lighted torch and the haggard face of the conventional fury. The notes relating to the design and the production reveal that the dancer wore fleshings and black boots under a robe of black and gold watered silk, wreathed in jewelled serpents. The drawing depicts a figure with a long stride and movement in the skirt, perhaps hinting at swift and purposeful action.

Meanwhile in England, Ben Jonson created the Dame for **The Masque of Queens** 1609 in imitation of Ate, the personification of Mischief. Drawing on his reading of Homer, Horace and Lucan, he entwined her hair with serpents like the witches Canidia and Erichtho, and had the frock tucked up and her feet bare in order to:

*seem more expedite.*⁷

Otherwise her actions and dancing are in the style of an English witch, and the two tunes for the dances are consistently entitled Witches Dances. As the first antimasque presented to the Stuart court, Jonson was determined to make a powerful scene, with all the authority of classical allusion to justify the participation of professional dancers in the noble event. His success on this occasion led to the full acceptance of the antimasque as a feature of the masque until its cessation.

An antimasque tune called The Furies survives from this period, and cannot be confidently assigned to a particular masque. It is in a collection of masque music c.1623 made by Nicholas Lestrangle. No published masque of this time has a group of furies in the action. Sabol⁸ suggests that it may be the music for the entry of mad people as the antimasque for **The Lords' Masque** 1612. This poses a whole series of questions about

the naming of such tunes. It is possible to envisage the musicians using 'The Furies' as an ad hoc way of referring to the cue for frantic dancers emerging from a cave. Or was the original idea to present furies to be tamed by Orpheus, rather than madmen? These questions prompt the observation that the frantics are said to be in the grip of 'reinsless fury' and that Mania has imprisoned Entheus (poetic fury) mistaking his fervour for madness.⁹ The tune is typical of the antimasque style with a first section of alternating unmeasured notes and a snatch of compound duple rhythm: probably indicating entries or grotesque gesture. The second section comprises two strains of duple time dance rhythm, but the character is not very marked, and certainly not expressive of rage or rapid movement.

Salmacida Spolia 1640 by Davenant was the last masque of the Stuart court, with designs by Inigo Jones. By now the antimasque section of masques had become extensive. The first was introduced by a Fury, who materialised from a globe of fire:

*her hair upright, mixed with snakes, her body lean, wrinkled and of a swarthy colour. Her breasts hung bagging down to her waist, to which with a knot of serpents was girt red bases, and under it tawny skirts down to her feet. In her hand she brandished a sable torch, and looking askance with hollow envious eyes came down into the room.*¹⁰

In her speech she summoned up evil spirits, which are then manifested as three furies. Unusually, the performers are named in the text as Mr. Charles Murray, Mr. Seymour and Mr. Tartareau, but there is no further information on their dancing. There follows a series of twenty antemasque entries representing the honest recreations of the nation, in which these dancers returned in new guises: Mr. Charles Murray in a solo for a shepherd; Mr. Seymour in a solo as an amorous courtier and Mr. Tartareau in a trio comprising a jealous Dutchman, his wife and her Italian lover and also in a quartet of antique cavaliers imitating a manège and tilting. Thus we have a rare glimpse of the repertoire of the professional dancer.

A decade later at the French court, **The Ballet des Noces de Pelée et Thetis** 1654 consisted of ten entries interspersed into the comedy of the same name. It was a particularly successful work, with poems by Benserade, set designs by Torelli and costumes by Henri de Gissey. Mollier and Beauchamp were the choreographers and the music was by Carlo Caproli. In the third scene, Jupiter descended to earth to seduce Thetis and was thwarted by Juno who summoned the Furies of Jealousy to assist her. These furies were disgorged from a monster mouth which opened up at her command. The furies were armed with fistfuls of serpents and drove Jupiter away. Then they danced in celebration of their success. The twelve furies were danced by the king (Louis XIV, aged 16) and three gentlemen, with Beauchamp, Mollier, Lully and five other professional dancers. The mingling of royal and professional dancers in a grotesque entry is markedly different from English practice.

The beautiful design by de Gissey¹¹ shows the costume for the king. All the attributes of a fury are present: snaky locks, girdles and bracelets; the sable torch and the dark robe; the screaming mask. The addition of flame motifs on the robe, breeches, collar, etc. enriches the presentation. The black and red plumes continue the theme of hellish fire and smoke, but also denote a noble dancer. The design is reiterated in an anonymous sketch¹², listing the names of the furies and showing a livelier posture. Thus

the continuing manner of representing a fury is varied by the elegance and richness of the noble performer. The set design by Torelli¹³ shows the monster mouth, the descents of Jupiter and Juno, and the twelve furies. Brandishing torches and serpents, the individuals look wild and aggressive, but the groupings are balanced and symmetrical. That such groupings were conventional in the theatre of the time can be confirmed by several sketches of grotesque performers, such as an entrée of savages for a French court ballet.¹⁴ Here the dancers are placed in symmetrical and acrobatic patterns, while making fierce and threatening postures. How far the dancing in **Noces de Pelée et Thetis** followed the grotesque style to create an expression of rage and fury or how much the interpretation was dependent on the noble style and moderated to the ability of a juvenile performer is the question posed by this work.

This long-standing system of representation allowed abstract ideas and inner passions to be expressed. Thus Menestrier advised in 1682 that La Hayne (Hate) could be shown as follows:

*Hate, on the contrary, should wear a fiery robe and carry a dagger in one hand and a vial of poison in the other, or a smouldering torch of black wax. The costume should be somber because this passion is not without sadness.*¹⁵

Here are the symbols of a fury adapted to a personification of hate. This visual shorthand was also employed to denote other figures from Hell, particularly demons and devils.

Meanwhile in England a band of witches practise malevolent mischief in **Dido and Aeneas**, aided by a group of furies. The only signs of their existence are the music for an Echo Dance of Furies and the stage direction requiring them to sink down in the cave following the dance:

*Thunder and lightning, horrid music. The Furies sink down into the cave, the rest fly up.*¹⁶

‘The rest’ are the witches. The music for the Echo Dance of Furies is a rapid alternation of loud and soft duple time phrases, each one a rush of semiquavers.¹⁷ The staging of this music might be in the manner of The Echo by Pemberton¹⁸ in which movements are stated by the first dancers and echoed but not repeated exactly by the second. This would require two groups for the performance: either two groups of furies or furies alternating with witches. The Echo also uses symmetrical patterning, thus, coupled with the information from grotesque dancing of the time, leads to the proposal that this scene would also feature symmetrical formations. The interpolation of the furies into the action raises questions about their dramatic function. Their presence adds to the notion of supernatural intervention, and at the least suggests to the audience that the cave is also a hell mouth.

Furies in the eighteenth century

A plate from Gregorio Lambranzi’s **New and Curious School of Theatrical Dancing** 1711¹⁹ shows the persistence of the fury image in other countries: a dark body suit, a skirt of flames and bat wings, clasping a flaming torch in either hand. A stage scene of hell and Cerberus in the bottom right hand corner makes plain the character. The explanatory words simply say:

This person does a great many different contortions, with furious and quick jumps, until the air has been played twice.

The music Disognio Furia is a simple duple time melody, with no expressive qualities.

The designers of the mature ballet de cour in France continued to represent furies in the stage tradition. Jean Berain, designer at the Opera 1673 to 1711, is said by Beaumont to have dressed furies

with their pendant breasts and straggled locks of twisting serpents ²⁰

although the illustration of a costume for a Fury included in his book *Ballet Design Past and Present* shows a freer interpretation.²¹ The shrieking mask is echoed in the upflung hands; the bat wings are echoed in the sleeves and cut of the skirted bases, whilst grotesque masks, probably Gorgon heads, finish the knee breeches. All these accord with classical attributes, but create a different, more fantastic, image of a fury.

Returning to the English stage, John Weaver presented three furies in **Orpheus and Euridice** 1718.²² The scene of hell was revealed whilst a symphony of horrid music was playing. The snake haired Furies were amongst the torments portrayed. They advanced when the music changed, and performed an entry. Thus they were in action, in representative fury mode, when Orpheus entered and charmed the scene with his playing. The power of music pacified hell:

At the Sound of this Lyre, the Furies stop their Dancing, and seem as struck motionless;

The furies were danced by Mr. Shaw, Mr. Wade and Mr. Topham, who had earlier danced as three Swains. As these are conventional mythological furies, based firmly on classical precedent, then we can be sure that they expressed rage, jealousy and threats in their entry. Thus Weaver's description of the gestures for these passions can be usefully applied:

Jealousy.

Jealousy will appear by the Arms suspended, or a particular pointing the middle Finger to the Eye; by an irresolute Movement throughout the Scene, and a Thoughtfulness of Countenance.

Anger.

The left Hand struck suddenly with the right; and sometimes against the Breast; denotes Anger.

Threats.

*Threatning, is express'd by raising the Hand, and shaking the bended fist; knitting the Brow; biting the Nails and catching back the Breath.*²³

In writing about the grotesque dancer in *Essay towards an History of Dancing*, Weaver stresses the need for the master performer to be informed in history and art, as well as highly skilled as a performer. He declares this branch of the profession to be much more demanding than the serious.²⁴

In marked contrast to the expressive approach of the accomplished grotesque, the next design is elegant and stylised. The designer for the opera **Iphigénie en Tauride** was

Jean Baptiste Martin, working between 1748 and 1760. Here²⁵ is a fury in court dress decorated with the symbols of a fury: serpents, bat wing shapes with a black bodice and red skirt. She clasps a fistful of serpents in one hand and a dagger in the other. As another example of the noble representation of a fury, this is a more stylised and less expressive approach than that of de Gissey. It is the first to show a female performer.

The design by Boquet,²⁶ working between 1760 and 1782, shows a return to the hideous fury. Although labelled a demon, the figure has all the attributes of a fury: the appearance of nudity in legs, arms and sagging breasts; a bat wing skirt; hair, waist and arms entwined with serpents, a shrieking mask and either a torch or a dagger in the right hand.

Ballet d'action

This survey has now brought us to the age of the ballet d'action, when classical and supernatural themes frequently required the representation of furies on stage. One of the artistic concerns of the age was to develop the expressive power of the dancer's movements and face, and to reduce the dependence on costume symbolism and masks. The discarding of the mask took place in 1772, according to Castile-Blaze,²⁷ but they were retained for furies and winds.

In **Theoretical and practical treatise on dancing** 1779, Gennaro Magri reveals that furies were common roles for the Ballanti, but that dancers needed to specialise in the fast moving characters.

*Whoever is suited to the furies always performs these, or else a symbol of the wind, which is similarly danced. Those of this character dance the 'grande Vitesse', so called by the French. This is not the character of the fury or of the wind but it is full of the same attitudes.*²⁸

This is a category within the grotesque, and Magri holds similar views to Weaver about the important distinction between the serious and the grotesque dancer. They also share the notion that the grotesque dancer is a more challenging area of the profession than the serious. Magri makes several references to furies during his treatise, and put together they throw some light on the dancing of the character. Furies dance to ternary or 3/4 time, played very quickly and 'scaggiosi' (fast and detached). Tunes are marked and violent, providing a technical challenge to the musicality of the ballante. The chaconne can be used in a violent spirit for furies, again posing a difficult task.

In discussing the attitudes, Magri says

To do an attitude in the manner of a fury, the same arm as the leg which is in the air will be lifted high beyond measure with the fingers held with the said irregularity, expressing the kind of rage which makes all the limbs of the body rigid, with scintillating eyes, gnashing teeth, like mastiff dogs, and everything else which can characterise their embittered, vicious and spiteful character; for regularity should never be observed in them but only a skilful speed in gesturing.

Note well, that despite their unseemliness and disorder, nonetheless they merit all attention: more indeed than all other characters they need to be expressed

*and performed with bodily agility, swiftness of legs, with grand and free gestures of the arms.*²⁹

The use of the arms shows how the representation of furies breaks the code of the ballet:

*Les grands bras, exaggerated arms, are, as we said, those employed in the tableaux, in the attitudes, in the Furies, and in other similar actions. These cannot have a determinate measure, an exact distance, but may be lifted as much as desired above the others....It should not be thought a fault if from time to time in the exaggerated arms, they pass over the head: in this case it is permitted but in others it would be an error.*³⁰

The ballante must also be skilled in waving the torches and agile in creating intertwined formations in tableaux.

This information is useful in imagining scenes from two works of the era. The first is **Don Juan** 1761 choreographed by Gaspare Angiolini to music by Gluck. The final scene is set in Hell. On trying to escape:

*a group of furies bar his way and brandish their torches so that the snakes in their hair become excited and hiss around him.*³¹

An eyewitness account says:

*Hell appears, furies dance with lighted torches and torment Don Juan, in the background a splendid firework represents hellfire.*³²

The great success of this work led it to be performed across Europe and America until the closing years of the eighteenth century. The music for the Furies Dance was re-used by Gluck in his opera **Orpheus and Euridice** in 1774, when the furies dance was choreographed by Gardel. The music accords with Magri's comments on furies: the rushing semiquavers in 3/4 time are fast and detached, with this energy supported in the lower parts. The whole has a strong supernatural atmosphere, suitable for the horror of the torment and destruction of the Don.³³

The second work is **Psyché** by Gardel, in which the fury Tisiphone snatches the lovely Psyche down into the Underworld, there to be tortured by demons and furies brandishing snakes. The emotional climate of this scene was much stronger than that of **Don Juan**, as he had deserved his fate whereas she was an innocent victim. Ivor Guest discusses the work in *The Ballet of the Enlightenment* and comments on the unusual realism of the scene and the audience response to the vivid portrayal. One critic provides a sketch of the scene:

*poor Psyche being tormented for half an hour by half a dozen hellish monsters each more frightful than the last, who amuse themselves by hurling her to the ground and picking her up only to throw her down again once more, and who paw and toss the timid young princess from one to another like a ball.*³⁴

This marks a high spot in the dramatic function of furies in the dance theatre, combining virtuosic dancing with histrionic interplay with the main character.

Furies in modern times

I have found no trace of furies to date in the Romantic ballet. This is not surprising as mythological themes were abandoned and hellish supernatural scenes disappeared. The supernatural creatures of the Romantic works – sylphs, wilis and peris – belonged to the milder natural world. However an illustration of an Italian work of 1812 **Il Noce di Benevento** produced by Salvatore Vigano shows a troupe of demons in the magic tree, demonstrating the continuation of the agile performances of the grotesque dancer: their manipulation of torches owes something to the fury. Perhaps this is the final appearance of a gang of fury specialists about to be superannuated.³⁵

However, modern dance and ballet have led choreographers back to the classics. Balanchine was motivated by neo-classicism to use Gluck's **Orpheus** for a ballet in 1936. With designs by Pavel Tchelitchev, a fury once more makes an appearance.³⁶ Gone are the stage attributes of the traditional fury. A scourge has been chosen as the instrument of torture, rather than the torch or dagger. A bare body, loins covered by a skirt, is also decorated on the chest with a skull or possibly a Gorgon mask. A significant change is that this body is unclothed, so that the masculine chest is revealed and no attempt made to establish a female character. The elongated and bestial mask is very modernist, giving the figure a nightmare dimension, rather than the features of a female in a rage.

Martha Graham found inspiration in mythology for portrayals of strong, passionate and often evil women. In 1952, she created a full length work on the subject of **Clytemnestra**. She used a group of furies almost as a chorus framing the main action. There are seven in all, but a group of three is significant, creating a background to the real and symbolic hell of Clytemnestra's story. The few references to the furies in her notebook³⁷ reveal little of her vision of these roles in the work or her sources. She does identify the attributes of each of the three, in line with the classical view: the restless one, the avenging one and the jealous one. She also notes that Clytemnestra is to act as a fury, and lead them. In the work, their natures of furious hate are expressed entirely in the choreography: a plain dark dress being worn with a severe and stylised haircut and expressionless face. Their frantic and emphatic movements with turns and vicious jumps are carried out with the dynamics of the Graham technique, yet their energy and speed supported by the music probably gives us something of the quality of furies in the past.³⁸

REVIEW

The evidence suggests that a tradition of representing furies begun in the sixteenth century came to an end in the nineteenth century. Balanchine and Graham were probably unaware of this long-standing practice and returned directly to classical sources for ideas, selecting features that could be assimilated into the aesthetic of their genre. Even if they had been in touch with the tradition, it is likely that they would have wished to do something innovative and distinctive in their own work as modernists.

The grouping of information provides a strikingly consistent picture across more than two centuries. The physical appearance of the fury has been clearly demonstrated. What information is there of the physical action? If we ignore for a moment the issue of changing technique and use of the body across time, then a picture can be assembled from the evidence:

swift and purposeful stride
fast steps to fast music
strange and irregular movements
great agility, stripped for action
fast jumps
a body trembling with rage
arms flung up to represent the enraged passions
extreme postures of the legs and arms
rage affecting the extremities of hands and fingers
a bestial quality to the fury

a screaming face or mask
looking askance and with envy
scintillating eyes
manipulating a torch or weapon
appear and disappear suddenly, through a trap
in tableaux, the creation of symmetrical groups
the skill of making intertwined and acrobatic groups

What does not seem to be available is choreography or even named steps. The compensation for this is that the passion in which the dancing of a fury is rooted is the common one of rage, which produces the same physical effect across time.

The continuity in the representation of the fury is marked. It has been delivered by the male professional dancer across the whole period. This throws into relief the few exceptions: the noble performance of the role and the presentation by women dancers. It also shows the possibility of specialisation in the fury/wind/speed category of grotesque dancer during the expansion of the ballet d'action.

Can further generalisations be made from this survey about grotesque dancing and the English antimasque? The likelihood of collecting circumstantial evidence to fill out a picture of grotesque performance and staging is strong. However the probability of gathering sufficient information for reconstruction of grotesque entries is small. Even if such information did emerge, it may not be possible to recreate them as that particular combination of a high level of dance technique with acrobatic and dramatic skills is not available today, even in the professional performer. We may need to continue using an informed imagination to envisage these strange and fantastic motions.

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