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ANTHROPOLOGY AND SPIRIT POSSESSION: A RECONSIDERATION OF THE PYTHIA'S ROLE AT DELPHI

DURING a consultation at Delphi, one of Apollo's servants imagined, heard, intuited, or feigned Apollo's presence and then uttered Apollo's divine response to the human client who made inquiry of the god. Such inspired mimicry appears incomprehensible to the non-believing distant observer to whom Apollo no longer speaks. Scholars hear nothing at Delphi and, steadfast in their faith in positivism, claim Apollo said nothing. In a similar fashion, scholars have pronounced that the Pythia, like Apollo, did not speak at Delphi, or that her attendant prophets reformulated her utterances and converted them into comprehensible prose or verse. Such a reconstruction of the divinatory consultation at Delphi, however, finds no support in the ancient evidence. *Not one ancient source suggests that anyone other than the Pythia issued oracular responses.*

While the question of Apollo's presence at Delphi may be deferred, the issue of whether the Pythia spoke at Delphi is a historical one.[1] Beginning with Erwin Rohde's monumental study, *Psyche: The cult of souls and belief in immortality among the Greeks*, the nature of divine possession and the Pythia's service at Delphi have attracted much attention. Although many of Rohde's ideas have been refuted, the connection he drew between possession and seemingly uncontrolled and uncontrollable rapture, such as that of the Bacchantes, remains a more or less unspoken assumption of subsequent inquiries. While most scholars have not accepted Rohde's historical reconstruction of the influence of Dionysus on Apolline cult at Delphi,[2] the image of the raging Maenad remains the dominant model for understanding and imagining the nature of possession and the Pythia's position at Delphi.

The image of the Maenad has held sway in the scholarship on Delphi because it seems to resonate with aspects of certain literary depictions of the Pythia as well as with Plutarch's account of a frenzied, speechless, and uncontrollable Pythia at a disastrous consultation at Delphi.[3] According to H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell, Plutarch's account is 'the only

[1] The following works are referred to by author's name: E. Rohde, *Psyche: The cult of souls and belief in immortality among the Greeks*, translated by W.B. Hillis from the eighth edition (New York 1925); T. Kramer, s.v. *Prophetes* in *The theological dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich, trans. G.W. Bromley (Grand Rapids 1968) vi; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the irrational* (Berkeley 1951); P. Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne à Delphes: Essai sur le fonctionnement de l'oracle* (Paris 1950); H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell, *The Delphic oracle* (Oxford 1956). C.R. Whittaker, 'The Delphic oracle: belief and behaviour in ancient Greece—and Africa', *HTR* lvii (1965) 21-48, G. Roux, *Delphes: son oracle et ses dieux* (Paris 1976). J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic oracle* (Berkeley 1978). R. Padel, 'Women: model for possession by Greek daemons' in *Images of women in antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (Detroit 1983) 3-19. S. Price, 'Delphi and divination', in *Greek religion and society*, ed. P. Easterling and J.V. Muir (Cambridge 1985) 128-54. R. Parker, 'Greek oracles and Greek states', in *Crux: Essays presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix on his 75th birthday*, ed. P.A. Cartledge and F.D. Harvey (Sidmouth 1985). G. Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, trans. A. Goldhammer, (Cambridge MA 1990).

[2] Rohde's thesis that prophecy and possession originally belonged to Dionysus and not Apollo has been sensibly refuted by Kurt Latte, who has argued that in the East, Apollo is also associated with prophecy and, very often, he has female priestesses. K. Latte, 'The coming of the Pythia', *HTR* xxxiii (1940) 9-19. Latte cites two inscriptions from Tralles, in W.M. Ramsay, *Cities and bishoprics of Phrygia* (Oxford 1895) i 95, no. 115 and L. Robert, *Études anatoliennes* (Paris 1937) 407 as well as Herodotus' comments on the priestess of Apollo in Patara (i 182). See also W. Burkert, 'Itinerant diviners and magicians: a neglected element in cultural contacts', in *The Greek renaissance of the eighth century BC: Tradition and innovation*, ed. Robin Hägg, (Stockholm 1983) 117 n. 24; B.C. Dietrich, 'Reflections on the origins of the oracular Apollo', *BICS* xxv (1978) 1-18. In a different vein, Dodds has rejected Rohde's thesis, arguing that it relies more on a Nietzschean dichotomy between 'rational' Apollo and 'irrational' Dionysus than on the evidence at hand. E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951) 69.

[3] See, for example, Lucan's *Pharsalia* (v 123-224), Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1072-1330), and Vergil's Cumaean Sibyl (*Aen.* vi 33-15. Plut. *Mor.* 438).

incident worth considering as evidence ... for Plutarch's friend, Nicander, was presiding priest on the occasion and could have supplied him with the authentic facts'.[4] Although Parke and Wormell admit that this is an exceptional episode, they nonetheless derive from it their interpretation of the Pythia's possession.[5] In their view, the Pythia was 'a simple and suggestible peasant woman', who became, upon the tripod, 'an easy victim to a self-induced hypnosis. Her conscious ego became submerged', and she uttered merely 'the confused and disjointed remarks of a hypnotized woman'.[6] Her speech is 'gabble' and 'irrational babble'. Consequently and necessarily, it is the *prophetai*, the male and rational attendants at the shrine, who provide answers to the clients' enquiries. Moreover, their presence seems to account for Delphi's 'consistent policy' of supporting Persia and Macedonia, for which Parke and Wormell find evidence.[7] That presence also explains away the apparent paradox that a female should occupy a position of importance in the decidedly political world of Delphi.[8]

The putative division of labour between the Pythia and the prophets has found support in the etymologies of the words προφήτης and μάντις, where *mantis* is derived from the root **men* and means 'one who is in a special mental state' and therefore is 'one who speaks from an altered state, let us call it inspiration, while the *prophetes* does not'.[9] *Prophetes* is a *nomen agentis* of the verbal stem *φη, 'to say', or 'to speak' and therefore is 'one who proclaims publicly'.[10] However, throughout antiquity, the Pythia is called variously *mantis*,[11] *prophetis*,[12]- and, in addition, *promantis*.[13] Apollo, like the Pythia, is also called both *mantis* and *prophetes*.[14] Thus, the notion that the prophets revised or versified and pronounced publicly inspired utterances that the Pythia produced in a state of possession finds no linguistic support.

More recently, Georges Roux and Joseph Fontenrose have argued that while the Pythia did

[4] Parke and Wormell i 37.

[5] Price (n. 1) 137. Price also notes that the changes in the Pythia's voice during this episode are 'bizarre and extreme' and therefore can not illustrate her behaviour under normal divinatory conditions.

[6] *Ibid.* i 39.

[7] Parke and Wormell i chapters 7 and 11. For a convincing argument that Delphi did not have such political agendas, see Parker (n. 1).

[8] P. Amandry is acutely aware of this contradiction and, like Parke and Wormell, posits that the rational prophets and not the possessed Pythia controlled the content and form of the oracle given to enquirers (n. 1). With slight variation, these roles are a commonplace in most literature on Delphi. W. Burkert, e.g., casually remarks, 'The utterances of the Pythia are then fixed by the priests in normal Greek literary form, the Homeric hexameter.' *Greek religion*, trans. J. Raffan (Cambridge MA 1985) 116.

[9] G. Nagy, 'Ancient Greek poetry, prophecy, and the concepts of theory', in *Poetry and prophecy: the beginnings of a literary tradition*, ed. J.L. Kugel (Ithaca 1990) 56-64.

[10] The most thorough treatment of the word *prophetes* is by Kramer (n. 1).

[11] *Mantis*: Aesch. *Eum.* 29 with 33.

[12] *Prophetis*: Eur. *Ion.* 42, 321, 1322; Plat. *Phdr.* 244b; IG xii (3) 863; Strabo, ix 3.5; D.S. xiv 13.3; xvi 26.4; Plut. *Mor.* 414b; Pollux x 81; Iamb. Myst. cxxvi 4.

[13] *Promantis* : Hdt. vi 66, vii 111 and 141; Thuc. v 16.2; Plut. *Alex.* 14; Lucian *Herm.* 60; Heliod. iv 16. See also G. Radke, *RE* (1957) vol. 23 s.v. *promantis*.

[14] In the *Oresteia*, he is the *prophetes* of Zeus as well as a *mantis* who does not lie (Διὸς προφήτης, *Eum.* 19 and μάντις ἀψευδής, *Ch.* 559; *Eu.* 18). While the Pythia, like Apollo, may be called both a *mantis* and a *prophetis*, thus suggesting the synonymity of these words, in one oft-quoted passage, Pindar indicates that there may have been a slight distinction between these words. Pindar writes, 'Be a *mantis*, Muse, and I will be a *prophet*.' μαντεύεο, Μοῖσα, προφατέυσω δ' ἐγώ Pi. Fr.150 (Snell). While Dodds assimilates the Pythia to the role of the Muse, when explicating this passage, Helmuth Flashar, on the other hand, likens the Muse to Apollo and the Pythia to Pindar. Neither analogy is convincing, however, since both the Pythia and Apollo are called by both titles. If a distinction is to be made between *mantis* and *prophetes*, perhaps, it is one of emphasis, rather than function. The word *prophetes* emphasizes the announcement of the divine message, while *mantis* emphasizes contact with the divine. Dodds (n. 2) 82, and H. Flashar, *Der Dialog Ion als Zeugnis platonischer Philosophie* (Berlin 1958) 64 n. 2.

indeed compose and issue oracles at Delphi,[15] nonetheless, many of the oracles, particularly verse oracles or oracles in the form of a riddle, are not genuine responses from Delphi. These oracles are playful inventions; in Roux's words 'they enchanted the spirit of Greece, which was fond of such subtleties'.[16] Fontenrose calls most verse oracles 'quasi-historical'. Upon the premise that they were recorded in writing a generation or so after their original utterance, he concludes that they are usually 'not authentic'.[17] In his analysis, the Pythia responded to the client's question, but in most cases, by simply approving or disapproving their proposals. Thus, both Roux and Fontenrose dismiss the majority of oracles as 'not authentic', and deem the Pythia the composer, or rather the approver, of the few remaining authentic ones.

Other scholars have examined Apollo's possession of the Pythia under the aspect of male fantasies about women.[18] Giulia Sissa has explored the significance of various Delphic items associated with the Pythia's possession, such as laurel, chasm and vapours.[19] She finds a parallel between the Pythia's posture on a tripod over an abyss emitting vapours and the medical treatment of hysteria,[20] and argues that this posture represents the sexual nature of Apollo's possession. Since the vagina and the mouth were symbolically equivalent in Greek culture, when the Pythia speaks Apollo's words, according to Sissa, she is metaphorically giving birth.[21] In such an economy, it seems likely, if not necessary, that the Pythia issues oracles in some form in a state of possession, although Sissa does not comment on the Pythia's service at Delphi.[22]

Ruth Padel, on the other hand, argues that since women were closely associated with polluting experiences and hence themselves were dangerous and potentially polluting, men felt compelled to control all aspects of women's lives, including their religious duties.[23] Such is the case with the Pythia who, according to one tradition which Padel cites, 'reveals and brings forth Apollo's divine word under the strict supervision of the priests who pattern the Pythia's words into verse'.[24] But the psychological and symbolic universe Padel evokes does not necessarily lead to this conclusion.[25] Since male rhetoric about women is motivated by anxiety and the need to dominate women, men's arguments about and symbolic constructs of the female must be viewed as less than reliable accounts of the actual conditions of women's lives.[26]

These reconstructions, while differing in method and detail, have much in common. None

[15] Fontenrose and Roux (n. 1).

[16] Roux 160. Here, Roux seems to follow Crahay who thought all the verse oracles in Herodotus were not authentic. R. Crahay, *La littérature oraculaire chez Hérodote* (Paris 1956).

[17] Fontenrose 42-47.

[18] These discussions represent one feminist approach to women and religion, one which is 'about the extent of male dominance in religious tradition or about the explanation for it'. C.W. Bynum, 'Introduction: The complexity of symbols', in *Gender and religion: on the complexity of symbols*, ed. C.W. Bynum, S. Harrell and P. Richman (Boston 1986) 4.

[19] Sissa (n. 1).

[20] Sissa 51.

[21] Sissa 53-70.

[22] Sissa insists that representation of the Pythia can tell us nothing about the Pythia's actual service at Delphi (19).

[23] Padel (n. 1) 6.

[24] Padel 6.

[25] Most of Padel's evidence about male dominance of women pertains to fifth century Athens. The controls that men may exercise or may want to exercise over their (fertile) wives in Athens may not be an useful analogy for understanding the lives of virgin priestesses in temples, especially at Delphi whose political, social and economic structure differed greatly from that of Athens.

[26] Male prescriptions and descriptions about how women should and do act are not necessarily accurate indications of how women led their lives, on which see D. Cohen, 'Seclusion, separation, and the status of women in classical Athens', *GRBS* xxxvi (1989) 3-15.

of the scholars posits that the Pythia both conceived of and composed the oracular responses. Whether her possession by Apollo renders her incapable of clear and coherent speech, or her 'peasant' status and 'gender' bar her from the realm of intelligible discourse or, at least, political discourse, or her biological functions seem to necessitate that the male prophets control her body and voice, the Pythia seems, in all these reconstructions, ancillary to the process of divination at Delphi. Although *every ancient source without exception or modification presents the Pythia as issuing oracular responses*, this possibility is universally dismissed. Deemed central to the process of communication with Apollo by the Greeks, she is relegated to the margins by subsequent scholars. The only notable exception is Simon Price in a brief essay on Delphi. After examining the ancient accounts of the Pythia's possession, Price sensibly refrains from defining her mental state. He argues that in as much as the Pythia is accused of receiving bribes, she must have had considerable, if not full, control of the oracles delivered to clients.[27] In the following, I also eschew the search for an interpretation of the Pythia's mental state. Instead, I attempt to uncover the 'ritual logic' of divinatory consultation in order to understand the mantic mechanism at Delphi more clearly and to bolster Price's brief observation that the Pythia played a decisive role during consultations at Delphi, and, not least, to repair one gap in women's religious history.

I. Spirit Possession in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Notions about spirit possession have largely determined the lines of argument about the Pythia's role during a consultation. In the last two decades, spirit possession has received renewed attention from anthropologists, whose insights, I believe, will be useful for understanding the ancient evidence.[28] While anthropology has often been used to understand various aspects of Greek religion including Delphic divination, it has been used in less than compelling fashion. In an early attempt to look at Delphi in the context of African divination, for example, Whittaker even conducted his own field work on that continent.[29] His field work, however, and his knowledge of African divination have little impact, if any, on his understanding of Delphi. In his article on Delphi and Africa, Whittaker first reviews many thorny problems in Delphic history, such as the prophets' and Pythia's services during the divinatory consultation, and Delphi's political role in Greece. Only after finding the solutions to these problems, does he turn to Africa. 'In view of these conclusions I have found it instructive to see how far Delphi is matched by parallels in societies of modern Africa.'[30] In other words, Whittaker's knowledge of African divination sheds no insight on Delphi. It does not help him reformulate questions or their possible solutions; it does not contribute to or challenge any of his views on Delphi. It simply supplies exotic parallels to conclusions he has already reached. Robert Parker, by contrast, uses anthropological literature on divination to construct a functionalist reading of how Delphi worked in the broader social and political context of archaic and classical Greece.[31] In a similar vein, I use comparative anthropology on African divination

[27] Price (n. 1) 141.

[28] Two rather distinct areas of interest, Europe and Africa, have recently received attention. The following is a representative sample of recent studies. Europe: C. Ginzburg, *The night battles*, trans. J. and A. Tedeschi (London 1983); D.P. Walker, *Unclean spirits* (Philadelphia 1981); R.L. Kagan, *Lucrecia's dream: politics and prophecy in sixteenth-century Spain* (Berkeley 1990); O. Niccoli, *Prophecy and people in renaissance Italy*, trans. L.G. Cochrane (Princeton 1990). Africa: P.M. Peek, ed., *African divination systems: ways of knowing* (Bloomington 1991). The introductory essay in this collection contains an overview and a lengthy bibliography of recent studies.

[29] Whittaker (n. 1).

[30] Whittaker 30.

[31] Parker (n. 1).

to define the mechanics of divinatory consultations which, I hope, will provide a framework in which the Pythia's possession can be evaluated.

Using recent anthropological literature, much of which is comparative, I wish to define some frequently used terms—ecstasy, possession, and trance—and in so doing to derive a working model that will illuminate the very common human experience of communing with the divine or spirits.[32] Working definitions of these words will provide a model against which the Greek evidence in all its specificity may be appreciated. Thomas Overholt, in his comparative study of prophets from the Old Testament and those of the native American Indians, defines 'model' as an

> 'outline framework, in general terms, of the characteristics of a class of things or phenomena.' Such a framework sets out in visual form the major components of the class and shows how these components relate to each other. Such a framework provides a structure for a systematic search for and arrangement of data in biblical and other accounts of intermediaries and allows them to be compared in terms of social structures and processes. As a result, specific historically and culturally conditioned aspects of the prophet's activity (of great importance in interpreting individual cases but distracting with respect to cross-cultural comparisons) can be temporarily kept in the background.[33]

A general model of what for most scholars constitutes a strange and exotic practice, namely spirit possession, will not account for the specific details of the mantic mechanism at Delphi. However, working with such a model allows one to replace irrational prejudices with expectations based upon an appreciation of the 'generic' characteristics of divinatory rituals. One can begin to isolate significant moments in the drama of spirit possession and to recognize what is commonplace in such an unfamiliar practice. Furthermore, an examination of the comparative evidence used to develop such models can shape one's imagination so that one can begin to appreciate and to understand the evidence of any one particular instance of spirit possession. Therefore, I begin with a general study of spirit possession and then go on to consider Delphi specifically.

Erika Bourguignon has argued that 'the term 'spirit possession' refers to a cultural theory, which exists in diverse forms in many societies, but not in all. It holds that certain spirits exist, which may enter the bodies of human beings—sometimes also those of animals and of objects'.[34] Ecstasy is a term rarely used by anthropologists, who prefer 'trance'.[35] 'Trance' refers to a certain behaviour and 'may be taken to be evidence for the occurrence of such possession'.[36] 'Trance' has been loosely and variously defined by anthropologists and psychologists alike as 'a sleep-like state marked by reduced sensitivity to stimuli, loss or alteration of knowledge of what is happening, substitution of automatic for voluntary activity',[37] or 'a condition of dissociation, characterized by the lack of voluntary movement and frequently by automatisms in act and thought, illustrated by hypnotic and mediumistic

[32] E. Bourguignon, 'Introduction: a framework for the comparative study of altered states of consciousness' in *Religion, altered states of consciousness, and social change*, ed. E. Bourguignon (Columbus 1973). In Bourguignon's survey of 488 societies, 437 (90%) societies have institutionalized incidences of altered states of consciousness, 251 (52%) of which are associated with spirit possession. On the usefulness of the comparativist approach in the study of Old Testament prophecy, see A. Cooper, 'Imagining prophecy' in Kugel (n. 9) 31-3.

[33] T.W. Overholt, *Channels of prophecy: the social dynamics of prophetic activity* (Minneapolis 1989) 21 and 1-15.

[34] E. Bourguignon, 'The self, the behavioral environment, and the theory of spirit possession' in *Context and meaning in cultural anthropology*, ed. M.E. Spiro (New York 1965) 39-60, 41.

[35] R.R. Wilson, 'Prophecy and ecstasy: a re-examination', *JBL* lxxxxviii (1979) 321-37.

[36] Bourguignon, 1965, 41.

[37] H.B. English and A.C. English, *A comprehensive dictionary of psychological and psychoanalytic terms* (New York 1958).

conditions'.[38]

While it may appear useful to separate the theory, 'spirit possession', from the occurrence of behaviours, 'trance' or 'ecstasy', as Bourguignon suggests, this division obscures the integral relationship between the theory and practice of spirit possession in any one culture. For within each culture the interpretation of such behaviours will affect how any instance of that behaviour is structured and evaluated. For example, Plutarch's informant interprets the Pythia, who is obliged to submit to possession, as possessed by a speechless and evil spirit.[39] Accordingly, he deems her behaviour, that is, her shrieking and tossing, inappropriate and curtails it. Thus, the immediate interpretation of the event shapes it.

Taking into account this process by which theory shapes experience, Vincent Crapanzano and Vivian Garrison define spirit possession more cautiously as 'any altered state of consciousness *indigenously* interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit'.[40] There are several advantages to this definition. In the first place, 'altered state of consciousness' is itself a valuable term in as much as it is neutral and implies no judgement about the normality of this state. In this definition, an altered state of consciousness is one which is perceptibly different from a usual state of consciousness.[41] Second, 'influence' can embrace the variety of ways in which a spirit may be imagined to affect a human being. It may 'mount' a human being, riding upon his/her neck or it may enter through the head. The spirit may marry, attack or have sex with a human being.[42] I use the word possession to refer to any of these forms of influence.

Third, their definition emphasizes the importance of native informants in determining which behaviours signal possession, which are ordinary and part of the individual's everyday personality, and which are unusual and inappropriate in either setting. Appreciating how members of a culture evaluate their own form of spirit possession can elucidate the characteristic features of possession. In Plutarch's account, for example, it appears that Nicander, who was present at the event and reported it to Plutarch, thinks that inarticulate shrieking and tossing is not a sign of Apollo's possession. If we take account of Nicander's perspective, we might hypothesize from this incident that such behaviour is extremely unusual and therefore is not integral to the Pythia's possession by Apollo. Furthermore, this emphasis on the observer's or informant's point of view allows one to recognize two concomitant features of spirit possession. First, since members of cultures where spirit possession is practised and institutionalized often have complex and nuanced interpretations of the validity and meaning of spirit possession, it follows that the behaviours associated with altered states of consciousness are *culturally* determined.[43] That is, the behaviours exhibited by individuals in an altered state, as unexpected and uncontrollable as they may appear to the observer, are stereotypical and fairly uniform

[38] I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic religion: an anthropological study of spirit possession and shamanism* (Baltimore 1971) 38.

[39] Plutarch 438. See p. 2 above.

[40] V. Crapanzano and V. Garrison, *Case studies in spirit possession* (New York 1977) 8. Emphasis on 'indigenous' is mine.

[41] An altered state of consciousness is a mental state, 'induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological manuevers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by the objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation, in terms of subjective experience or psychological functioning, from certain general norms as determined by the subjective experience and psychological functioning of that individual during alert, waking consciousness.' Crapanzano and Garrison 8.

[42] Crapanzano and Garrison 9.

[43] M.J. Buss, 'The social psychology of prophecy' in *Prophecy: essays presented to Georg Fohrer on his sixty-fifth birthday*, ed. J.A. Emerton (Berlin 1980).

within a culture.[44] For example, in the *Zar* cult in Ethiopia, possessed women will act in very specific ways in order to indicate which spirit is possessing them and what the appropriate response should be. And different gods or spirits will often produce different behaviours in those they possess.[45] Second, within one culture there may be very different types of behaviours which indicate spirit possession; there need not be one monolithic expression of communion with the divine.

A cross-cultural perspective shows that women have often been the agents of possession, and there are many different theories as to why this should be so. Anthropologists have figured women as the victims of the society in which they live, and thus they have interpreted possession as a legitimate way for women to express their frustrations, fears, demands, and criticisms in male-dominated societies. These scholars have understood women's possession as a way to mediate and win 'the battle of the sexes' and to express or create social tensions.[46] Others have stressed the positive values of possession: it is cathartic, it allows women access to otherwise forbidden behaviours, and the cult groups in which it is practised constitute a support network.[47] Recently, the possession cults of women have been seen not merely as the expression of social tensions, but as responses to legitimate ailments, particularly those associated with reproduction, and as methods of healing.[48] Alternatively, scholars have viewed possession as a way for women to gain access to areas from which they are otherwise excluded. Figured as passive recipients of divine commands or knowledge, women, in this guise, can address matters of religious propriety, dispense medical cures, solve marital disputes, and participate in political issues. In short, women can exercise considerable power in political and religious spheres, as long as they are believed to be possessed and to speak with the authority of the spirits or god(s) possessing them. This is the case even in the most traditional and patriarchal of cultures, if we define patriarchal as a society in which men hold and exercise most political and religious offices.[49]

[44] In many cultures, individuals must exhibit very specific behaviours in order to be diagnosed as 'possessed'. If possessed persons function, as they often do, as healers and diviners, a long and arduous period as apprentice under an established practitioner of such arts must he fulfilled. The behaviours of the possessed apprentice are very often scrutinized and evaluated by the community in order to assess his/her suitability for such a prestigious career. See, for example, A. Morton, '*Dawit*: competition and integration in an Ethiopian Wuqabi cult group,' in Crapanzano and Garrison (n. 63); R. Bier, 'Diviners as alienists and annunciators among the Batmmaliba of Togo' in Peek 1991 (n. 28); J. Beattie and J. Middleton (eds.), *Spirit mediumship and society in Africa* (New York 1969).

[45] J. Boddy, *Wombs and alien spirits* (Madison WI 1989). See also K. McCarthy-Brown, *Mama Lola: a vodou priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley 1991): W. Davis, *Dojo: magic and exorcism in modern Japan* (Stanford 1980).

[46] Such views are critically reviewed by A. Spring, 'Epidemiology of spirit possession among the Luvale of Zambia', in *Women in ritual and symbolic roles,* J. Hoch-Smith and A. Spring, eds., (New York 1978) 167.

[47] W. and F. Mischel, 'Psychological aspects of spirit possession', *American Anthropologist* lx (1958) 249-60; S.D. Messing, 'Group therapy and social status in the Zar Cult of Ethiopia' in *Culture and mental health,* ed. M. K. Opler (New York 1959); C. Ward, ed., *Altered states of consciousness and mental health: a cross-cultural perspective* (Newbury Park, CA 1989); E. Bourguignon, *Possession* (San Francisco 1976).

[48] See Spring (n. 46) and Brown (n. 45).

[49] One of the most stunning examples of the considerable power accorded to such women is that of Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth-century Rhineland mystic. Not only did Hildegard leave a large and impressive collection of manuscripts on medicine, sexuality, saints' lives, religious doctrines, several illuminations, symphonies, songs, and plays, she also left behind her letters, which give evidence of her great political prestige and power. She corresponded with the king of Germany, Frederick Barbarossa, Pope Alexander, various archbishops and other clergy and dignitaries. The considerable influence Hildegard had throughout her life was directly dependent on her visions and provides a detailed and compelling example of the surprising power women can wield within patriarchal structures by means of their spiritual lives. See S. Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: a visionary life* (London 1989); B. Newman, 'Hildegard of Bingen: visions and validation', *Church History* liv (1985) 163-75. On medieval mystics, more generally, see E.A. Petroff, *Medieval women's visionary literature* (Oxford 1986); C.W. Bynum, *Jesus as mother* (Berkeley 1982).

To state it briefly, I will use the term 'spirit possession' to mean any altered state of consciousness, where the behaviour of an individual is markedly different, though in a stereotypical way, from his or her normal behaviour, and hence is indigenously interpreted as the influence of an alien spirit, where 'influence' may be variously defined. I shall forgo the casual use of the words 'ecstasy' and 'trance', as these words appear less precise and are unnecessary. My definition of 'spirit possession' is also a model in so far as it implies a general outline of a class of phenomena by means of which I may organize the ancient evidence concerning the Pythia.

II. Plato and Possession

A list of synonyms for mantic wind (πνεῦμα μαντικόν) recorded by Pollux, a second century AD scholar, indicates the various ideas which the Greeks, less than systematically, and at different times, associated with spirit possession.[50] Notably absent from Pollux's list is the word *ecstasy* (ἔκστασις). In Greek, ecstasy can refer to an abrupt change of mind and indicates that one does not quite seem to be one's self. That is, it does not indicate that the soul has left the body, as Rohde once thought, but that the person has abandoned his usual ways.[51] The word *entheos* (ἔνθεος) implies that a god is in the body; the terms 'filled with the god' (πλήρης θεοῦ), and 'enthusiasm' (ἐνθουσία) seem to suggest a similar notion.[52] The word *epipnous* (ἐπίπνους) literally means 'breathed upon'. It, like mantic wind (πνεῦμα μαντικόν), reveals the rich complex of imagery connecting the gods with wind and supplies a way of imagining the physical component of spirit possession, wherein the divine wind enters the individual through any one of his or her orifices. Sometimes the voice issuing forth from a possessed person is imagined to be the divine wind.[53] The English word 'inspiration' belongs to this cluster of ideas. The word *katochos* (κάτοχος) in the passive sense literally means 'held' or 'owned' and therefore is most akin to the English word 'possessed'.[54] Finally, the verb *anabakcheuo* (ἀναβακχεύω) means 'to rouse into the worship of Dionysus, or intransitively 'to worship Dionysus', and refers to one type of orgiastic cult in which the participants were believed to be in close communication with Dionysus. From these few words one gains a sense of the manifold ideas associated with spirit possession in the Greek world. In order to evaluate the Pythia's role in a consultation, however, I will forego any discussion of how Apollo and the Pythia were imagined to communicate with one another[55] and any ancient theories about how the divine and human communicated with each other. I will focus instead on the *behaviours* that were typically associated with spirit possession.[56]

[50] Pollux *Onom.* i 15. ἔνθεος καὶ ἐπίπνους καὶ κάτοχος καὶ ἐπιτεθειασμένος καὶ κατειλημμένος ἐκ θεοῦ ... καὶ ἐνθουσιῶν καὶ κεκινημένος ἐκ θεοῦ, καὶ ἀναβεβακχευμένος καὶ πλήρης θεοῦ καὶ παραλλάττων ἐκ θεοῦ.

[51] Dodds (n. 2) 94 n. 84; Burkert (n. 8) 110. Interestingly, the Greek definition of the word ecstasy is remarkably similar to Crapanzano's and Garrison's definition of altered state.

[52] Dodds (n. 2) 87 n. 41; Burkert (n. 8) 109; Plut. *Mor.* 438b. W.D. Smith, 'The so-called possession in pre-Christian Greece', *TAPA* lxxxxvi (1965) 403-36 is cautious about claiming that the spirit was actually believed to enter into and possess a person.

[53] The concept of πνεῦμα receives thorough treatment by Kleinklecht, s.v. πνεῦμα, in *The theological dictionary of the New Testament* (n. 1).

[54] Burkert (n. 8) 110; Padel (n. 1)13 n.20.

[55] On the ancient evidence about the imagined mode of Apollo's possession of the Pythia, see Sissa (n. 1).

[56] A definitive treatment of possession in Greek culture is beyond the scope of my project. I have relied upon Dodds' discussion, which remains, in my opinion, thorough and convincing. Dodds (n. 2) 64-102. See also Burkert (n. 8) 109-18.

My native informant on the behaviours of possessed persons in ancient Greece is Plato, one of the few authors whose writings contain both casual and extended remarks on spirit possession. While Plato may not be a disinterested observer, he is, nonetheless, an acute observer of his culture. He consistently uses prophets as a comparandum in explaining the kind of knowledge poets have about their own compositions. While Plato's comments about poets seem to be distinctly his own, his comparison will only work if his comparandum is a cultural given. Therefore, Plato's remarks on prophets and seers provide examples of the types of behaviour typically associated with spirit possession.

In three dialogues, *Apology, Ion, Phaedrus*, Plato makes extensive remarks about spirit possession. In the *Apology*, Socrates reports that he has received an oracle that no man is wiser than he. In his attempt to verify the oracle, he turns to the poets, thinking that they will surely prove wiser. However, he realizes that 'they do not make their poems by means of wisdom [*sophia*], but rather by means of nature [*phusis*] and in communion with the gods [*enthousiazontes*], just like the seers and oracle-chanters. For these say many noble things, but they do not understand what they say. The poets also seemed to undergo a similar experience.'[57] Here, the experience of the poet is assimilated to or explained in terms of the experience of the seer and oracle-chanter. Through this comparison, Socrates is able to explain a fact he finds puzzling, namely that the poets appear to have little knowledge of the meaning of the poems they compose. More specifically, as Socrates explains, the creation of poems and oracles relies not upon wisdom but upon nature and communication with the gods. The basis of this comparison, then, is the ignorance both the seers and poets have of their products, an ignorance Socrates understands in terms of their shared techniques, namely their *enthousiasmos*.

Yet what does Socrates mean when he says that poets and seers do not understand what they themselves say? Judging from what Socrates says in the *Apology* and the *Ion*, it seems that Socrates believes that while a rhapsode may sing of ship-building, for example, he cannot necessarily build a ship, nor does he even necessarily know anything about sailing. We may conjecture that when Socrates claims that seers do not know anything, he means something similar. Although seers may offer advice and prophesy about war, for example, they cannot lead an army, nor do they necessarily know anything about military strategy. The notion of possession seems to explain why a rhapsode, such as Ion, or a poet or a seer, can speak at length on a number of topics about which, when he is not reciting poetry, he appears to know nothing.

In the *Ion*, the comparison between seers or oracle-chanters and poets is further elaborated as Socrates attempts to explain to Ion, the hopelessly naive rhapsode, how it is that poets and rhapsodes create their works and why they are ignorant.

> For all good epic poets compose beautiful poems not by means of skill [*techne*], but being in communion with the gods and possessed [*entheoi ontes kai katechomenoi*]; and also the lyric poets compose in this way. Just as the Corybantes, not being in their senses [*ouk emphrones*], dance about, in this way also the lyric poets not being in their senses compose their fine poetry. When they begin their harmony and rhythm, they act like Bacchantes [*bakcheuousi*] and are possessed, just as the Bacchantes, when not in their right mind, draw honey and milk from rivers.[58]

Again Socrates explains the nature of poetic talent by comparing poets with the Corybantes and the Bacchantes. Socrates seems to suggest that the use of rhythm and harmony induces loss of the senses in orgiastic worshippers and poets. The poems poets produce while in this state are, like the milk and honey of the orgiastic worshippers, miraculous because they pour forth from

[57] Pl. *Apol.* 22c. Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[58] Pl. *Ion* 533e.

the poet without his own efforts. As Socrates goes on to say, poets are like bees lighting upon the Muses' flowers. Later in this dialogue, Socrates again compares poets to seers, 'no man, as long as he has possession of his mind (*nous*), is able to compose poems or chant an oracle', and 'god, snatching the mind (*nous*) of these men [the poets], uses them as ministers, just as he does oracle-chanters and seers'.[59] All these statements and images figure the poet as passive. His poems, like his senses, are wholly outside his body/mind and are not in his control. Here, as in the *Apology*, these comparisons, which portray the poets as passive and witless, seem intended to explain why poets are generally ignorant of the things about which they sing.

In both the *Apology* and the *Ion*, Socrates portrays poets and seers as completely passive and ignorant when they compose their oracles or poems, and we may wonder to what degree this notion is a cultural commonplace. In archaic Greek poetry, most poets invoke the Muses for some kind of divine assistance when they are reciting their poems. When Hesiod meets the Muses on Mt. Helicon, they give him a sceptre and breathe song upon him.[60] Afterwards they command him to sing, which their gifts of sceptre and song enable him to do. While Hesiod uses the language of possession to explain, or represent, the sources of his art, he nowhere implies that he is witless or passive. Nor do any poets, from Homer onwards, portray themselves as such.[61] This aspect of Plato's discussion of poets, then, seems to be idiosyncratic.[62] It appears to be motivated by Socrates' larger arguments about the acquisition of true knowledge as opposed to false knowledge or ignorance in each of these dialogues. However, we may accept that Plato's general association of spirit possession with composing poems, reciting oracles, and participating in orgiastic cults is a fairly commonplace belief about the effects of contact with the divine on human behaviour and abilities.

In contrast to these dialogues where poets are compared to seers or orgiastic worshippers, in the *Phaedrus* all three[63] are presented as exemplifying the effects of contact with the divine.[64] In Socrates' palinode on love, he recants the statements he made to Phaedrus about the evil madness of the lover by claiming that the greatest goods come to man through madness (*mania*), as long as that madness is divine.[65] In defense of his claim, he then catalogues three different groups of people upon whom beneficial and divine madness confers its blessings, the

[59] Pl. *Ion* 534b-d. In a similar vein, Socrates assimilates statesmen to seers and poets in order to explain why they do not fully understand the words they seek. *Meno* 99c-e.

[60] Hesiod, *Th.* 31-32. ἐνέπνευσαν δέ μοι αὐδὴν θέσπιν.

[61] For a full list and discussion of passages on poetic inspiration such as these, see E.N. Tigerstedt, 'Furor poeticus: poetic inspiration in Greek literature before Democritus and Plato', *JHI* xxxi (1970) 163-78, and P. Murray, 'Poetic inspiration in early Greece', *JHS* ci (1981) 87-100. See also Homer's depiction of Demodocus, the bard, in *Od.* xxii 347-48. In the passage under discussion, Murray suggests that the divine song of the Muses may indicate the fluidity of speech necessary for oral 'composition in performance', for those whom the Muses love speak effortlessly (Th. 96-7 with Murray 95). Both Tigerstedt and Murray successfully demonstrate that earlier poets do not present themselves as witless or passive as Plato describes them.

[62] Democritus also expresses similar ideas about possession, on which see E.A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge MA 1963) 162, and Tigerstedt, 1970.

[63] Those afflicted with illness engage in telestic purifications such as those offered by the Corybantes and Bacchantes, so in effect we have, more or less, the same three groups as elsewhere. See M.L. Morgan, *Platonic piety: philosophy and ritual in fourth-century Athens* (New Haven and London 1990) 165-66.

[64] In the *Phaedrus*, words for possession occur rarely. There is κατοκωχή (245a). Most often the word *mania* is used, sometimes being qualified by 'from the gods' (*apo theon*). This, I think, indicates both the fluidity of the ideas surrounding possession, or contact with the divine, as well as the degree to which Plato's own purposes dictate his presentation of cultural phenomena.

[65] Pl. *Phaedr.* 244a. νῦν δὲ τὰ μέγιστα τῶν ἡμῖν γίγνεται διὰ μανίας, θεία μέντοι δόσει διδομένης. 'Madness' is an unfortunate translation for *mania* because the English word conjures up images of nineteenth century asylums and the like. As Amandry has pointed out, the word, though often associated with Bacchic revelries, does not necessarily imply frenzied behaviour. Amandry 43-8.

prophets, including the Delphic Pythia and the Dodonean priestesses, those beset with illness who then become members of certain orgiastic cults, and the poets. Since this passage has received attention both in the literature devoted to possession and in discussions of the dialogue, I will make only a few brief comments.[66]

While this passage obviously serves a larger purpose in Socrates' argument about the lover and his acquisition of knowledge, the same skeleton of ideas about possession that we have traced in the previous dialogues emerges. The three groups, the orgiastic worshippers, the oracle-chanters or seers, and the poets, emerge as people who are in some kind of contact with the divine. They display three different types of behaviour all related. All their activities involve rhythm and harmony, for example. The behaviours these three groups exhibit, prophesying, participating in an orgiastic cult, and versifying, need not be assimilated to one another, however. They stand as three different behaviours indigenously interpreted as evidence of spirit possession. Once again, these ideas do not seem prompted by Socrates' arguments and may be treated as cultural commonplaces, while Socrates' theories about the exact nature of their possession may be more idiosyncratic.

The Pythia's behaviour at Delphi falls comfortably into Plato's typology about the effects of spirit possession on human behaviour. She, like the seers, is credited with making prophetic utterances. Perhaps more importantly, she, like the poets, is always depicted as coherent and articulate, fluent and knowledgeable almost beyond comprehension, when she recites her oracles, some of which were in verse.[67] All these features of her performances indicate that the divine was working in or near her, just as the production of verses in archaic poetry is consistently depicted as a result of divine assistance. To deny the Pythia's fluency and poetry is to deny her possession, because both possession and poetry are inextricably linked in archaic Greece. Neither a raving hysteric nor a prop of priests who duped the public, the Pythia at Delphi produced utterances that are a genuine expression of a cultural system which believed in and codified behaviours and speech that it understood as indicating the presence of the divine. To argue that spirit possession rendered the Pythia incapable of coherent prophetic speech or that the Pythia does not versify her words but waits patiently while someone else does so is to assume that the Pythia alone is an exception to the paradigm of spirit possession in early Greek culture. I doubt that she is.

III. Divination in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

If the Pythia played a vital role in the divinatory session at Delphi, delivering oracles orally to consultants, as I believe she did, of what exactly did a divinatory session consist? Again, a brief survey of varied divinatory practices and the ways they have been classified will illustrate their shared features and suggest a range of possibilities for Delphi. Here I limit myself to the mechanisms used in divinatory procedures and the functions they served. I should state that in the absence of more detailed information about a divinatory session at Delphi, my reconstruction might be said to be purely speculative as are all others. I believe, however, that it relies more on deduction from comparative anthropology than on silent assumptions or prejudices and that it is more consistent with ancient evidence.

Systems of divination have been variously classified. Plato's distinction between 'ecstatic'

[66] Amandry 41-50; Dodds 64-102; 158-87. See Morgan (n. 63) 164 n. 23 for a bibliography of recent work on the Phaedrus.

[67] P1. *Laws* 719c. 'Whenever a poet sits on the Muses' tripod, he is not in his senses, he is like a spring which readily allows its water to flow' on which, see Murray (n. 61) 95-6. See also W.R. Connor, 'Seized by the nymphs: nympholepsy and symbolic expression in classical Greece' *CA* vii (1988) 155-89, esp. 156-62.

and 'non-ecstatic' forms of prophecy, the first unlearned and not reliant upon skills (*atechnos, adidaktos*), and characterized by madness (*mania*), the second learned and skilled (*entechnos, technike*), remains one possible way of distinguishing between different forms of prophecy.[68] While I think that the behaviours that Plato associated with spirit possession represent cultural commonplaces and hence are useful in thinking about spirit possession in ancient Greece, I hesitate to accept this distinction because it appears motivated by Plato's arguments about the acquisition and value of the knowledge (or ignorance) of poets and seers. Moreover, this distinction resists application to all cultures because a diviner will often exhibit some form of spirit possession in conjunction with an empirical form of divination such as ornithomancy or cleromancy.[69] It is possible, for example, that even the Pythia at Delphi used cleromancy.[70]

A more elaborate system of classifying divination can be found in Emily Martin Ahern's *Chinese ritual and politics*.[71] Ahern's system is based solely upon Chinese divination but coincides remarkably with Evan Zeusse's scheme derived from a comparative sampling.[72] The virtue of both of these systems is that they illuminate the constants of very diverse divinatory methods. Ahern focuses on divination as an act of communication. She divides divination into two categories, the 'non-interpersonal' and the 'interpersonal'. The non-interpersonal category includes 'systems of knowledge' such as horoscopy, geomancy, physiognomy. In non-interpersonal divination, there is no communication between the diviner and the spirits. Rather, the diviner interprets 'impersonal patterns of reality'.[73] In other words, at the moment when the diviner reads his compass or the lines on a client's face, the spirits are not sending a message through him or to him. Since no message is sent at the time of divination, Ahern claims that there is no communication. However, I think we can say that these methods are a form of communication between humans and spirits, if we allow for the delay between the time when the spirits imprint their messages on the impersonal world and the time when human beings might decode their messages. In this case, the following discussion of interpersonal divination applies also to non-interpersonal divination.

In interpersonal divination, the spirits do send a message to the diviner *at the time of consultation*. Thus the act of divination is a communicative gesture. Spirit possession falls into this category, along with augury using lots, fire, birds, bones, baskets, termites, chickens or any

[68] Plato, *Phaedr.* 244 c-e. This distinction is discussed at length by A. Bouché-Leclerq, *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité* (1879-1889; reprint New York 1975). A. Caquot and M. Leibovici, *La divination: études recueillies* (Paris 1969) rely on this distinction in their survey.

[69] E.M. Zeusse, 'Divination', in *The encyclopedia of religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York 1987) 375-82; J.R. Crawford, *Witchcraft and sorcery in Rhodesia* (Oxford 1967) 179-81.

[70] Amandry has argued that there were two distinct practices at Delphi, the lot oracle and the more prestigious prophetic oracle, (25-36). Fontenrose dismisses the notion that there was a lot oracle at all (219-223). The evidence for the use of cleromancy is scant—it is not directly referred to in any sources, but is merely suggested (i) by the verb 'take up' (*anairein*), used to introduce less than ten percent of all recorded oracles, namely 12, 17, 26, 43, 51, 57, 60, 80, 92, 102, 104, 107, 113, 123, 134, 136, 137, 155, 165, 172, 174, 178, 212, 218, 219, 255, 262, 281, 287, 316, 317, 320, 328, 358, 362, 375, 386, 398, 405, 412, 462, 482, 484, 509, 559, 565, 570, 575, 581, 605 (numbers refer to Parke and Wormell's edition of oracle; since the oracles introduced by *anairein* are evenly distributed throughout the corpus, are in both prose and verse, and pertain to a variety of matters, it is near impossible to draw any conclusions about the use of this verb; 2) by the phiale which the Pythia and/or Apollo holds in several vase paintings of Delphi (Printed in Amandry 66-77); 3) an inscription which may be restored in such a way so as to mention two beans and hence imply cleromancy was practised (on which see Fontenrose 222-23). Cleromancy may have been practised at Delphi; however, given the scanty evidence, I do not think it is possible to say much about it.

[71] E.M. Ahern, *Chinese ritual and politics* (Cambridge 1981).

[72] Zeusse (n. 69) 376.

[73] Thus Zeusse describes 'wisdom divination', the category in his system of divination which corresponds to Ahern's 'non-interpersonal category' (Zeusse 376; Ahern 51-63).

other such device. During divination these devices may be considered possessed by the spirits. They are called 'randomizing' devices because they insure that the human diviner or client cannot control the outcome of the divination, which appears instead as the spirit's message.[74] In the case of spirit possession, the human body becomes the randomizing device. The spirit may speak through the human body by means of twitches, pains, dreams, automatic writing, or it may employ the voice of the individual.

In all instances, the purpose of such randomizing devices points toward a more generalized feature of divination, namely that it sets up 'resistance'. That is, 'divination is not simply a weapon to be taken in hand by any who wishes to increase his influence; the call upon the diviner requires a particular sort of occasion, and the diviner must look to his own rules and to his own need for professional independence. An important aspect of divination as institutionalized procedure is just this—that it provides 'resistance' in its own right to any client's proposal'.[75] Without such resistance, real or imagined, the diviner or the divinatory institution would lose its credibility and appear merely as a slavish accessory to whomever it served. By establishing resistance, randomizing devices insure that divination is an 'objective' system of access to divine knowledge.

It is obvious how non-human randomizing devices set up resistance and establish objectivity. In spirit possession, where the god is perceived to speak through the diviner, it is less obvious how the same effect is achieved.[76] I would like to suggest three possibilities, recognizing that there are many similarities among them. The first two possibilities apply to language of the diviner; the third to his body and demeanour.

In the first category, the words of the diviner are obscured. In the case of Nyole divination in eastern Uganda, for example, gourd diviners shake their rattles while speaking so that the sound of their voice cannot be heard. The rattling of the gourd is particularly loud at the beginning and end of a session. The diviner will rattle the gourd intermittently throughout the séance periodically precluding the possibility of dialogue.[77] In the second instance, the language of the diviner hovers on the brink of incomprehensibility because he garbles his words and uses unusual intonation. David Jordan reports that after a Chinese shaman (*tang-ki*) becomes possessed he speaks an unintelligible, loud and high-pitched 'gods' language' which in the next few minutes becomes a variety of Hokkien.

> It is distorted by the imposition of melodic lines that destroy the normal tones of words, and it is complicated by the introduction of odd expressions, interrupted by belches and vocative shrieks addressed to the 'little brethren, a term used by the Third Prince to address his followers. The god is now ready for questions. These are normally addressed to him by the head of the household, standing anxiously beside the family altar. After each answer has been given, the medium's flow of speech trails off and becomes a series of unintelligible mutterings, and the bystanders discuss the import of what has been revealed. Because of the distorted language, only people who have been through many seances with Tian-huah are able to interpret what he says, and they sometimes must ask for clarification.[78]

[74] Ahern 53.

[75] G.K. Park, 'Divination and its social contexts', *JRAI* lxxxxiii (1963) 195-209.

[76] Ahern distinguishes three features which characterize the communication between spirits and humans: it follows constitutive rules instead of regulatory ones, its code can be highly restricted, and it often involves elaborate interpretation (53 ff.). Her useful distinctions apply to both human and non human randomizing devices and I have indirectly borrowed from them in order to derive my own understanding of the language of possessed diviners.

[77] S.R. Whyte, 'Knowledge and power in Nyole divination' in Peek (n. 28) 162-64.

[78] D. Jordan, *Gods, ghosts and ancestors* (Berkeley 1972) 75-6, quoted and discussed with a different perspective in Ahern 54.

Here, the diviner's speech threatens to become completely unintelligible.[79] At both the beginning and end of his answers, forces seemingly beyond his control create a language that is not a language. At the moment when the spirits become most human, embodied in human form and speaking a human language, they teasingly retreat and speak their own language, a series of garbles and belches in this instance, as if to remind their human audience that communication with spirits through the human institution of language can only be oblique. Human spectators are forced out of direct dialogue with the gods and must painstakingly interpret the garbled or inaudible sounds emitted from the diviner. Distortion of the diviner's language, however it is achieved, is one method of insuring that the spirits are speaking, not the diviner.

In the second category, where the client and diviner freely talk to one another without strange and unintelligible eruptions on the part of the possessed diviner, the diviner uses vague or ambiguous language. Consider the final paragraph of a consultation by an Arab diviner in Kenya recorded and then analyzed by David Parkin. The diviner has, with the help of the client, 'discovered' that the client is inquiring about the welfare of a young child. He says:

> 'You saw something astonishing in his house, didn't you—like a wild animal from the forest going in? Now that animal came up to the child, who fell asleep and went "Haw haw" [the noise of an animal]. And even the next day, when he's about to recover, the sickness goes away a little but then comes right back. The disease then comes and goes every two days, with the child going "Haw haw" at its onset. For now there are spirits active there, which must be seen to quickly.'
>
> There is an interesting kind of two part syllogism here, the first of which uses metonymy. First: the child is approached by the sickness (initiated by a rasp); therefore the animal is the sickness. Second: the animal is from the outside (i.e. the forest); spirits are from the outside; therefore the animal is the spirits (therefore to treat the spirits is to treat the sickness).[80]

This use of imagery to convey information from the spirits during divination resembles the allegorical and metaphorical communications of the spirit world in dreams, and the effect is the same. At the moment when the divine might become comprehensible by being forced into human bodies and human language, it resists such taming and reduction. Metaphoric and ambiguous words and images make the diviner's language of divination different from his own and represents the spirits speaking through him.

At this threshold where intelligible human language becomes resistant to analysis, the diviner's productions become random, that is, they appear to be demonstrably outside the control of the diviner, therefore to be under the power of spirit possession and credible. Perhaps more importantly, such linguistic gestures serve as a reminder that however close to the human world the spirits may come, they are not part of it. At the moment when the distance between the human world and divine seems obliterated, linguistic obfuscation, however it is achieved, indicates that that distance is not to be crossed; human language becomes strange and untranslatable and as such it becomes the god's language.[81] It is important to note that while such moments may characterize most divinatory language and mark it as different from ordinary communication, they do not characterize the whole of the diviner's speech. Much of what the diviner says is intelligible and similar to everyday language.

At a divinatory session that may take the form of an ordinary interview (not unlike

[79] One is reminded of Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*.

[80] D. Parkin, 'Simultaneity and sequencing in the oracular speech of Kenyan diviners' in Peek (n. 28) 178. See also in the same volume J.W. Fernandez, 'Afterword'.

[81] Furthermore, these odd linguistic gestures mark the paradox of spirit possession—how can one represent the spiritual world in a familiar idiom such as language without diminishing its transcendence or otherness?

psychotherapy), a third possible way of making the diviner's speech appear random presents itself.[82] Attendant circumstances, such as the diviner's posture, the tone of his or her voice, unusual clothing, or any unusual gestures, may function, however obliquely, as randomizing devices. And, of course, many of these attendant circumstances will be present at other kinds of divinatory sessions as well.

In summary, we might say that divination is a form of communication between the spirits and human beings. The message sent by the gods may take any form. It may be a description of the past, present, or future. It may be a warning, an admonition, a command, or advice. This communication, however, must be marked as different from ordinary discourse, and the responses of the diviner must appear objective. For both these reasons, all forms of divination employ randomizing devices. In non-interpersonal forms of divination, (i.e., where the diviner interprets impersonal patterns of reality, such as astrology or geomancy), the message sent from the spirits patterns reality so that it may be decoded by a trained diviner long after the message was sent. We may say that these patterns are themselves randomizing devices, since they are incapable of being manipulated by any human agent. In interpersonal forms of divination, the spirit possesses human or non-human agents to send a message at the moment of consultation. Non-human objects serve as randomizing devices as does the general demeanour or unusual language of the possessed diviner. Interpretation of such randomizing devices may fall to the diviner, to the client, or to both. After this general outline of divination, I turn to the divinatory procedures at Delphi.

IV. Centre Stage at Delphi: Imagining Apollo's Voice

When an inquirer travelled to Delphi, whether on personal or state business, he was required to perform several preliminary rites. He had to purify himself in holy water, perhaps from the Castalian spring. Before he entered the temple, he had to offer a sacred cake, which might be costly, on the main altar outside the temple. After entering the temple, accompanied by the priests at Delphi and a *proxenos*, a local representative from his own city, he had to sacrifice a sheep or a goat on the inner hearth from which the Delphians claimed portions in lieu of a monetary fee. There was a fixed order for consultations. The Delphians had priority in such matters and could determine the order of other inquirers, granting the more important ones permission to go first. Eventually the order of consultants was fixed by lot. After the sacrifice the inquirer could enter the *adyton* in the west end of the temple where the consultation would take place.[83]

In addition to the Pythia and the consultant(s), there may have been several Delphic attendants present at a consultation. There are three titles for the attendants at Delphi—*hosios, hiereus*, and *prophetes*. The title *hosios* appears in Plutarch, who reports that five *hosioi*, who were Delphians and elected to office for life, took part in preliminary rites and may have been present during the consultation.[84] The title *hiereus* also appears in Plutarch (*Mor.* 437a). From inscriptional evidence, it appears that there were two *hiereis* appointed for life, at least after 200 BC.[85] Only the title *prophetes* appears in earlier literature, although it never occurs in Delphic

[82] See for example, V. Garrison, 'The Puerto Rican syndrome in Psychiatry and *espiritismo*', in Crapanzano and Garrison (n. 40).

[83] On the preliminary rites, see Parke and Wormell i 30-3.

[84] Plut. *Mor.* 292d, 365a, 437a, and 438b. The title *hosioi* also appears in several Delphic inscriptions, for which see Fontenrose, 219, n.32.

[85] Fontenrose 218.

inscriptions.[86] *Hiereus* and *prophetes* may be different titles for the same office. Plutarch applies both titles to Nicander.[87] Both Fontenrose and Parke suggest that *hiereus* is a more general term and that *prophetes* may be the title given to the same individual when he participated in a consultation.[88] Parke and Fontenrose argue that two *hosioi* and at least one *prophetes* were present at a consultation.[89] However, from this late evidence, it is impossible to ascertain *whether* any of these officials were present at a consultation in archaic times, much less what they did.

On the basis of the comparative evidence I have surveyed, I imagine that a consultation would very likely have entailed an announcement of the client's question, Apollo's answer, and perhaps a discussion of the matter at hand. The focus would have been upon the Pythia, however. As the possessed and chosen instrument of Apollo, she was the conduit of divine knowledge. When the consultants came with well-defined plans, she either approved or disapproved them.[90] Where there was no definite plan of action, she may have issued a response in either prose or verse.

Is it reasonable to imagine that in archaic Greece a women could have played such a decisive role? In addition to the many examples of women in other cultures who occupy powerful positions by virtue of possession, Herodotus provides ample evidence that Greek priestesses enjoyed great prestige. As Carolyn Dewald has suggested, Herodotus' portrait of women is especially valuable both because his sources were oral and culled throughout the Greek-speaking Mediterranean world and thereby not representative of the controversies of one particular state, and because Herodotus was inventing a genre and therefore not constrained by the prior conventions of a genre.[91] Of particular interest is Herodotus' notice about the Dodonaean priestesses from whom he reports that he learned about the theological question whether the gods were born or, as eternal beings, always existed.[92] Shortly thereafter, Herodotus reports the history of the Dodonean shrine which he again claims to have learned from the Dodonean priestesses, Promeneia, Timarete, and Nicandra.[93] In two instances Herodotus reports that the Pythia was bribed, which, I think, indicates that the Pythia issued the oracular response.[94] These are but a few instances where women appear to have active and intellectual lives at the shrines of the gods outside of the strictures of the *polis*.

[86] Hdt. viii 36; Eur. *Ion* 369-372, 413-16, with Fontenrose, 216. The word *prophetes* also appears in Aelian, *NA* x 26; Plut. *Mor.* 292d, 438b.

[87] Plut. *Mor.* 386. Parke, 1940, 87.

[88] A scholiast's note on *Il.* xvi 235 records, 'they call those who sit around the oracle and carry out the prophecies made by the priests (*hiereis*) prophets (*prophetai*)' only confuses matters further. But I do not think this late notice should be given too much weight. Fontenrose, 219, n. 31.

[89] Parke struggles to decide which of these officers may have versified the oracular response. No ancient source credits them with versifying the response. Both Strabo and Plutarch say that versifiers (not the *prophetes* or *hiereus*) put the Pythia's words into verse. Simultaneously, they both claim that the Pythia sometimes spoke in verse herself (Str. ix 3.5 and Plut. *Mor.* 405d and 407b). I find it difficult to draw any conclusions from these contradictory claims, both of which are quite late in Delphi's history. However, since there are no other notices of such versifiers in any of the literature on Delphi, nor in any inscriptions, and in addition, these same authors think there were versifiers at Delphi, contra W. McLeod, 'Oral bards at Delphi?', *TAPA* lxxxxii (1961) 317-25. See also Fontenrose 213-1

[90] In the cases where we have inscriptions which begin with the formula, 'it is better for you...' it appears that the consultants might come asking for the Pythia to simply sanction or forbid a course of action. Fontenrose 37-8 and 221.

[91] C. Dewald, 'Women and culture in Herodotus' Histories', *Women's Studies* viii (1981) 93-127. In Herodotus there are 62 notices of priestesses of which roughly half are the Pythia.

[92] Hdt. ii 53.

[93] Hdt. ii 55.

[94] Hdt. v 63; vi 66; Thucydides also reports an instance where the Pythia is bribed (v 16.2).

Unfortunately, we do not have many more such notices, nor do we have detailed evidence about women's religious activities. In a fragment from a Euripidean tragedy, Melanippe the protagonist both affirms the participation of women in the religious sphere and provides some reasons for the scarcity of ancient evidence on women's cult practices. She says,

> ... But women are better than men. I will prove this. [5 lines are lost here] Women govern the house and store goods shipped from abroad inside the home. A house bereft of a wife is not tidy nor prosperous. In regard to matters concerning the gods—and I judge these matters to be foremost—we women hold the greatest share. In the houses of Phoibos Apollo, women prophesy the mind of Loxias. Around the pure steps in Dodona by the holy oak, the female race reveals the thoughts of Zeus to those from Greece desiring to know his will. Rites in honour of the Moirai and the nameless goddesses are accomplished; these rites are not holy among men, but among women they prosper. All female rites are just in respect to the gods. How is it possible that the female race has an evil reputation?[95]

In her final question, Melanippe implies that women have an evil reputation because men are the sometimes hostile promulgators and masters of the stories told about women. The chorus in Euripides' *Medea* regrets that Phoebus Apollo did not bequeath the power of song to women. If only he had, the chorus explains, women might have corrected the libelous versions of womanhood circulated by men.[96] We may attribute the limited notices and stories about women's activities in ancient Greece to the interests, if not hostility, of the male authors who chose not to record them. We need not, however, mistake this silence for the silence of those women themselves. Moreover, in the area of religion, Melanippe suggests another reason why men, as the masters of the tradition about women, are silent about women's cult practices—men did not have access to them. The paucity of evidence about the Pythia's tenure and functions at Delphi may reflect the predilections and the limited knowledge of the keepers of the Greek traditions. Herodotus' notices, however brief, give us some glimpse into the positions and powers available to women at religious shrines, which limited evidence from other oracular shrines, such as Dodona and Didyma, seems to confirm.[97] In as much as *every ancient source depicts the Pythia as the source of Delphic oracles*, I see no reason to doubt that she occupied a comparable position at Delphi.

What was the randomizing device used at Delphi to insure that the Pythia's words were those of the god? The figure of Cassandra, especially as she is depicted by Aeschylus in *Agamemnon*,

[95] The most recent edition of the fragments from Euripides' *Melanippe* is that of S. Auffret, *Mélanippe la philosophe* (Paris 1987) (Fragment 13). Translation mine.

[96] Eur. *Medea* 410-430.

[97] At Dodona and Didyma, there is limited evidence which suggests that the prophetesses, not the prophets, issued oracular responses. At Didyma, Catherine Morgan has questioned the assumption that in archaic times the *mantis* was male, based as it is on Herodotus' account of Branchos, founder of the Branchidae, the family of priests in charge of the shrine. C. Morgan, 'Divination and society at Delphi and Didyma', *Hermathena* cxlvii (1989) 17-42 (27). More compellingly, in a recently discovered inscription from Didyma, a *hydrophoros* of Pythian Artemis refers to her great-grandmother as *prophetis*. The mention of a *prophetis* here seems to confirm the existence of prophetesses at Didyma, if not Iamblichus' account of their activity at the oracular shrine. The title *prophetis* also appears in two other inscriptions from Didyma. W. Gunther, *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* xxx (1980) 170-75, with H.W. Parke, *Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor* (London 1985) 231 n. 12. At Dodona, the evidence for the existence and activity of prophetesses is equally obscure. Herodotus paints a vivid picture of his conversations with the Dodonaean priestesses (discussed above). Additionally there is frequent mention, in a variety of sources, of the priestesses at Dodona who are called doves, Peleiai or Peleiades, on which see H.W. Parke, *The Oracles of Zeus* (Oxford 1967). In a sensible survey of this cult title and its implications for assessing the role of the priestesses at Dodona, Jebb argues that when Sophocles describes the prophetic oak as speaking διοσσῶν ἐκ Πελειάδων, he implies that the priestesses orally issue the oracular responses. R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles: the plays and the fragments, V: Trachiniae*. While the evidence from Dodona (and Didyma) is complex and requires a more thorough examination than possible here, it is significant that in both instances there are intimations that women were associated with these shrines and may have played an active part in the issuing of oracular responses.' We may also evoke the comparative evidence from medieval Europe, which offers a compelling paradigm for women's lives in religious institutions.

might provide some clues, for her utterances are specifically compared to Delphic prophecies (*Ag.* 1255). While I think it is necessary to take into account the considerable restraints that the genre of tragedy and this particular instance might impose upon her representation, I would emphasize the following features of Cassandra's depiction.[98] Apparently overwhelmed by some force, presumably Apollo, Cassandra initially garbles her speech. She then prophesies coherently and speaks in poetic metaphors (*Ag.* 1214 ff., 1256 ff., 1306 ff.). She uses animal metaphors to describe Clytemnaestra (1214 ff.) and her own and Agamemnon's demise (1256 ff.). Her final pronouncement of her imminent murder uses the image of sacrifice, which the chorus understands literally and believes to refer to the sacrifice of animals (1306 ff.) In all three instances, while Cassandra moans before speaking, her speech is not gibberish, and indeed is highly complex in its use of interrelated and competing images to describe future events.

If Cassandra may be used as an indication, the randomizing device employed at Delphi was perhaps both verbal gibberish at the beginning of the Pythia's utterance and poeticized speech, that is, versified and ambiguous language. The notices of oracles, many of which are in verse and are ambiguous, indicate that this was very likely the way in which the Pythia's language was distinguished from ordinary discourse. Not composed after the fact, nor a ruse of Delphic priesthood to avoid any political *faux pas*, verse or ambiguous language served a distinct religious function—it indicated that the Pythia's possession was real and that her utterances were Apollo's.

What did the male attendants at Delphi do? There is little evidence on how they served Apollo at Delphi, but I think the chorus in the *Agamemnon* and Plato's *Timaeus* may provide some clues. In addition to formulating the clients' questions, before the consultation, perhaps by converting them, when appropriate, into the form 'is it better for us to ...', after the consultation they may have tried to help the consultant *interpret* the Pythia's words. They did not reshape these words. They did not convert them into verses. They may have been, as Plato suggests, the interpreters (*hypokritai*) of the divine voice which spoke in enigmas, that is, the Pythia's voice.[99] Like the chorus of old men in Agamemnon, they may have tried to make sense of the images and strange turns of phrase Apollo's prophetess used.

The Pythia was possessed by Apollo; this did not keep her from speaking coherently. Rather, the concept of spirit possession enabled and authorized a Delphian woman to deliver her prophetic utterances orally and intelligibly to those who visited Delphi. Those utterances had varied forms, (sometimes they were in verse), and they pertained to a wide array of circumstances. All of them, I submit, ultimately issued from her. To remove the Pythia from the centre of this religious drama and deny her agency is to render the spectacle of consulting Apollo incomprehensible. It is to stand outside the house of Agamemnon and imagine its history as one in which its women had no share.

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[98] Cassandra's knowledge of the history of the house of Atreus is derived from a vision of Thyestes' feast. Since it is not possible to determine whether the Pythia had such visions, this aspect of her portrayal is a moot point. On such visions, see Dodds (n..2) 71.

[99] See n. 9 above.