POWER, PERFORMANCE AND THE PYTHIA:
THE POLITICAL USE OF DELPHIC ORACLES

A Thesis

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By

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Modern theories concerning the nature of operations at Delphi posit that Delphic oracles had strong pan-Hellenic and pan-Mediterranean political influence. Most often this influence is analyzed as a coherent Delphic political policy or active political control, maintained and communicated by the Pythia herself or her attendant priest(s), made legitimate and authoritative through claims of Apollo's authorship, and accepted and enacted by consultants to the shrine. This approach is flawed insofar as it focuses meaning and, thus, power within the oracular text as a fixed and transmitted message from a Delphic political source rather than involving both Delphic functionaries and consultants within the process of the oracle's production, interpretation, enactment and entextualization. Theories of Delphic power marginalize the control that consultants have over oracular discourse within and outside Delphic consultations, ultimately relegating consultants to passive roles of recipients and enactors of politically charged oracular messages. The linear relationship between the annunciated oracular text, interpretive meaning and consultant political action, evidenced in most major theories of Delphic operations, is too simplistic and does not adequately reflect the roles of consultants or Delphic functionaries. The examination of oracular interactions, both within and outside the Delphic shrine, underscores the active and essential role of
consultants in shaping the form and content of the final oracular message, ultimately calling into question the power of the Delphic shrine as an independent political force.
For Ben
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Any faults remaining with this thesis are entirely my own.
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INTRODUCTION

PERFORMANCE, BELIEF, AND THE LIMITS OF POWER

Oz, left to himself, smiled to think of his success in giving the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman and the Lion exactly what they thought they wanted. 'How can I help being a humbug,' he said, 'when all these people make me do things that everybody knows can't be done? It was easy to make the Scarecrow and the Lion and the Tin Woodman happy, because they imagined I could do anything. But it will take more imagination to carry Dorothy back to Kansas, and I'm sure I don't know how it can be done.'

—Frank L. Baum, The Wizard of Oz

No longer believing in the voice of Apollo, we as scholars often expect to find an individual or individuals responsible for the form and content of Delphic oracles who, through this position, dramatically shaped and manipulated the local political landscape of the ancient Mediterranean. Often this role is foisted upon the men of Delphi (its priests and prophets) or even upon the Pythia herself, the historically attested source of oracular messages. Yet such assignations, which omit the motivations, expectations, and experiences of the consultants themselves, do little to explain the true functioning of oracles as political messages.¹ Throughout the textual record, the plays of power surrounding oracular messages are far more complex than a simple obligatory enactment of political injunctions given from the shrine. Often the power of oracles resides less in

¹ R. Parker 2000 provides a refreshing divergence from this general trend in scholarship.
what is said at Delphi, than in what is done within the local political community. Instead of recognizing this political complexity, most theories of Delphic power leave us with a one-sided perspective of power, driven solely by the needs and predilections of Delphic functionaries who acted either as willful charlatans or as true believers who were themselves deceived by unknown and inexplicable forces.2

While all ancient sources unanimously assert that the Pythia (or Apollo) was consulted at Delphi and that the Pythia (or Apollo) provided the oracular response, scholars, particularly prior to the 1950’s, placed this communicative control within the hands of the male priests and prophets3 of Delphi. They argued that the Pythia presented a direct contradiction to the standard operation of power in Greek political systems. As a poor, uneducated, peasant woman, her gender and social status would typically bar her from political action, yet Delphic oracles spoke to matters of the highest political import—colonization, warfare, interstate alliances, and alterations to legal and religious practice. How could such a woman wield such power?

Two major theories have attempted to resolve the supposed paradox surrounding the female communication of Delphic oracles within a male dominated political system. The first suggests that the Pythia’s performance obfuscated the actual control held by the male priests and prophets over the content of Delphic oracles. Appearing in various


3 Although I gloss prophētēs as “prophet,” it should be noted that the Greek term has a far wider range of meanings than any English word approximating its sense. Prophētēs is used both to refer to male functionaries at the Delphic shrine and to refer to the Pythia herself. References to the Pythia as prophētēs, along with an etymological discussion of the term, are recorded by L. Maurizio (1995:70).
forms, this theory asserts that male Delphic functionaries controlled oracular messages either through their influence over the simple and suggestible Pythia or through their versification and interpretation of the Pythia’s garbled, incomprehensible or otherwise deficient speech. The second, influenced by feminist anthropology, actively challenges the notion that the “men of Delphi” controlled oracular content at all. This theory asserts that the Pythia was fully in control of the communication of oracles and demonstrated, through her clear and direct performance, resistive powers against the highly patriarchal Greek political system. The Pythia, it is suggested, could speak with political power because she spoke as the mouthpiece of the god Apollo himself and not from her own position as a poor, uneducated peasant woman.

Although both theories serve to provide an explanation for the interaction of communication, political power and gender at the Delphic shrine, neither has extensive support within the textual record. Evidence, in general, for male control over oracular discourse is sparse and problematic, relying upon intricate systems of translation, versification, or organized intelligence wholly unattested within the ancient sources. For instance, the performance of the Pythia as raving and incoherent, while marginally attested, is generally marked as abnormal or comes from late or otherwise unreliable sources.\(^4\) In fact, all ancient sources characterize the Pythia’s responses to consultant inquiries as direct and articulate, performed as the final form of the oracle without interference from male functionaries. Yet even when the Pythia’s direct communicative

\(^4\) Marked as abnormal: Plutarch *De Defectu Oraculorum* 438b. Late and unreliable: Lucan *Pharsalia* 5.190-196, John Chrysostom *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 29.170, Origen *Contra Celsum* 7.3-4. See Fontenrose 1978:204.
powers are recognized, the nature and impact of the her possible “resistive power” is likewise woefully unattested. The Pythia’s responses typically indicate collusion with, rather than resistance to, dominant political structures. If the Pythia were demonstrating “resistive powers,” it is unclear toward whom or what these counter-hegemonic powers might have been directed. Ultimately, these theories’ primary effect is to marginalize or romanticize the communicative powers of the Pythia without convincingly demonstrating the possible agendas of the individual or individuals responsible for oracular content.

The discussion and critiques that follow attempt to deconstruct the reductive connections among ritual performance, political power and belief that are endemic to most modern scholarship on the Delphic shrine. The first two chapters detail the historic progression of theories of Delphic control, examining both the conception of male functionaries (Chapter 1) and of the Pythia herself (Chapter 2) as sources of oracular power. Ultimately, these theories of Delphic control prove inadequate because they assume a direct and absolute connection between the political power of oracles and the performance of oracles at the shrine. Drawing from this critique, Chapter 3 explores the play of oracular power within the local political sphere. This discussion highlights how the needs and expectations of consultants dramatically influence the final form, content, and interpretation of the enacted oracular message.
CHAPTER 1

OF MEN AND MANIC POSSESSION

The image of a raving and incoherent Pythia, though little attested in our ancient sources, held sway in the scholarly imagination of the Pythia’s possession state, particularly prior to the 1950’s. The Pythia’s communicative deficiencies, theorized in these scholarly accounts, provided a convenient point of entry for male control over the content of oracles. Parke and Wormell, in a typical assertion of this theory, argue that the priests and prophets of Delphi shaped oracular discourse either by “implanting suggestions in the Pythia’s mind” or by rendering the unintelligible gibberish of the Pythia into authentic utterances, though the manner through which this was accomplished is left ambiguous. “A few apparently purposeless answers” signal, in their accounting,

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6 H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell 1956:33-34, 39-40. Parke and Wormell suggest that the Pythia’s statements were reduced “to some form,” either prose or verse, by the male prophet.
the presence of the Pythia’s irrational state.\textsuperscript{7} To support these claims, Parke and Wormell draw their main evidence from the following passage in Plutarch:

\begin{quote}
Κατέβη μὲν εἰς τὸ μαντείου ὡς φασιν ἀκούσα καὶ ἀπρόθυμος, εὔθες δὲ περὶ τὰς πρῶτας ἀποκρίσεις ἢν καταφανῆς τῇ τραχύτητι τῆς φωνῆς οὐκ ἀναφέρουσα δίκην νεώς ἐπειγομένης, ἀλάλου καὶ κακοῦ πνεύματος οὕσα πλήρης τέλος δὲ παντάπασιν ἐκταραχθείσα καὶ μετὰ κραυγῆς ἀσῆμου καὶ φοβερᾶς φερομένη πρὸς τὴν ἔξοδον ἐρριφεὶς ἐαυτὴν, ἡστε φυγεῖν μὴ μόνον τοὺς θεοπρόπους ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν προφῆτην Νικανδρον καὶ τοὺς παρόντας τῶν ὀσίων.
\end{quote}

[The Pythia] descended into the oracle, so they say, unwillingly and unready, and as to her first replies it was at once evident by the harshness of her voice that she was not speaking correctly. She was like a hastened ship filled with a dumb and evil spirit. Finally, having become wholly agitated and carrying herself with inarticulate shrieking and panic, she threw herself toward the exit so that not only those enquirers fled but also the prophet Nikander and all the pious men present.\textsuperscript{8}

While Parke and Wormell note that the passage itself is “exceptional”, they, nevertheless, use it to construct a generalized account of the Pythia’s performance, ultimately characterizing her possession as the self-hypnosis of a simple and suggestible woman.\textsuperscript{9}

Yet the applicability of Plutarch’s description for understanding the possession of the Pythia, even in the most general sense, is questionable.\textsuperscript{10} Although Plutarch’s description of this incident may be “trustworthy,” as Parke and Wormell suggest (Plutarch was...

\textsuperscript{7} H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell 1956:40. Again, Parke and Wormell do not provide specific examples.

\textsuperscript{8} Plutarch  \textit{De Defectu Oraculorum} 438b. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.


\textsuperscript{10} L. Maurizio 1995:70 and S. Price 1985:136-7 likewise note the oddity of Plutarch’s description and share my misgivings over the applicability of this passage for reconstructing the Pythia’s normal possession state.
acquainted with the prophet at the scene, Nikander\textsuperscript{11}), the scene is directly marked by Plutarch as abnormal, the result of priestly disregard for the proper pre-consultation procedures.\textsuperscript{12}

Nowhere else does Plutarch give the slightest indication of a disjointed, confused, incoherent or otherwise maddened state during the Pythia’s possession. In fact, when Plutarch describes the Pythia’s normal inspiration, he emphasizes the direct role of the Pythia in shaping the oracular text in accordance with her own natural faculties:

\begin{quote}
où γάρ ἐστι θεοῦ ἡ γῆρας οὐδ’ ὁ φθόγγος οὐδ’ ἡ λέξις οὐδὲ τὸ μέτρον ἀλλὰ τῆς γυναικὸς ἐκείνος δὲ μόνας τὰς φαντασίας παράστησαι καὶ φῶς ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ποιεῖ πρὸς τὸ μέλλον ἡ γὰρ ἐνθουσιασμὸς τοιοῦτον ἔστι.
\end{quote}

Neither the speech nor the voice nor the diction nor the metre are the god’s but the woman’s; the god only presents the vision and makes a light in her soul with respect to the future, for such is inspiration.\textsuperscript{13}

In Plutarch’s account, it is inspiration (enthusiasmos) alone that moves the Pythia, not divine ventriloquy, madness or self-hypnosis. No hint is given that any Delphic entity other than the Pythia formulates the final oracle, whether in prose or verse.\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{12} Before oracular consultations, as Plutarch relates, the priests of the shrine would sprinkle a sacrificial goat with water. The inspirational presence of Apollo was indicated through the goat’s subsequent violent shaking. The goat’s immobility, on the other hand, demonstrated the absence of the god and precluded the possibility of consultation on that day. On this occasion, the priests of Delphi, eager to please an important foreign delegation, went far beyond normal procedures, deluging the goat before it finally exhibited the required sign. The Pythia’s response, frantic and raving, is presented as the result of insufficient attention to ritual procedures, not as a marker of Apollo’s possession of the Pythia (Plutarch De Defectu Oraculorum 438a-b).

\textsuperscript{13} Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 397c.
A passage from Lucan similarly was used by scholars to demonstrate the "manic" possession state of the Pythia. Lucan, like Plutarch, presents a narrative of a Pythia, Phemonoe, whose possession state was characterized by violent movements and garbled speech. She was forced, similarly, to prophesy under inauspicious circumstances—the god had not been present at the shrine for some time. Phemonoe attempted to resist inquiry of her consultant Appius by asserting that the Delphic shrine was mute. When that failed, she feigned possession but to no avail. \(^{15}\) Threatened with punishment by a now indignant Appius, Phemonoe retreated to the chasm where the god Apollo possessed her, as Lucan describes:

\begin{quote}
Spumae tunc primum rabies vaesana per ora
Effluuit et gemitus et anhelto clara meatu
Murmura, tum maestus vastis ululatus in anris
Extremaeque sonant domita iam virgine voces:
"Effugis ingentes, tanti discriminis expers,
Bellorum, Romane, minas, solusque quietem
Euboici vasta lateris convale tenebis."
Cetera suppressit faucesque obstruxit Apollo.
\end{quote}

\ldots first the wild frenzy overflowed through her foaming lips; she groaned and uttered loud inarticulate cries with panting breath; next, a dismal wailing filled the vast cave; and at last, when she was mastered, came the sound of articulate speech: "Roman, thou shalt have no part in the mighty ordeal and shalt escape the awful threats of war; and thou shalt stay at

\footnote{Fontenrose, using the same passage, comes to much the same conclusion. I only quibble, on anthropological grounds, that this passage destroys "the whole theory of mediumship and possession" with regard to the Pythia (see J. Fontenrose 1978:206-207). Certainly spirit mediumship does not preclude the lucidity or creativity of the practitioner in formulating the divinatory response. The Pythia speaks the oracle insofar as Apollo "speaks" the oracle as well—the conflation of these two subject positions is crucial for the perceived authority of the oracular message. The manner by which this is accomplished, maddened or otherwise, does not preclude spirit mediumship, so long as the Pythia is recognized as the vessel of Apollo's inspiration.}

\footnote{Lucan Pharsalia 5.130-165.}
peace in a broad hollow of the Euboean coast.” Then Apollo closed up her throat and cut short her tale.¹⁶

Despite the Pythia’s maddened behaviors and incomprehensible groaning, which Lucan insists are normal characteristics of Apollo’s inspiration,¹⁷ the oracle itself is spoken clearly and directly, without need of outside translation or versification. Though the account as a whole is more literary than historical,¹⁸ it demonstrates yet again the idea that the Pythia performed oracles in clearly annunciated, though sometimes ambiguous, statements, as other ancient oracles.

This is consistent with the clear and direct character of the Pythia’s responses to consultant inquiries noted in earlier sources. Herodotus, our most voluminous early source on the Delphic oracle, consistently characterizes the Pythia as the direct responder to oracular inquiries. Even where Herodotus specifically states that a community sent to Delphi to elicit the advice of the god (ὁ θεός), it is the Pythia who provides the oracle.¹⁹

¹⁶ Lucan Pharsalia 5.190-196. (trans. J.D. Duff, Loeb ed.)

¹⁷ Fontenrose suggests that part of the confusion over the Pythia’s possessed state in later authors such as Lucan arose from the translation of the Greek word mania (“transport, rapture, inspiration, ecstasy”) into the Latin term insanio or vecordia (J. Fontenrose 1978:204).

¹⁸ The passage itself betrays far greater knowledge of the poet Virgil than of procedures at the Delphic shrine. The description of the Pythia’s possession is based upon the Aeneas’ visit to the Sibyl of Cumae described in book 6 of the Aeneid and provides little information which is specific to Delphic rites (J. Fontenrose 1978:210, following Amandry, Virgil Aeneid 6.77-80).

¹⁹ See for example Herodotus 4.15, 7.148 and 7.169. It should be noted that both Thucydides and Xenophon shy away from mentioning the Pythia herself or her oracular performance. Both assert that Apollo (or simply “the god”) provided the oracle (see, for instance, Thucydides 1.118, 1.126, 3.92 and Xenophon Anabasis 3.1.5-8, Hellenica 6.4.30, Lac. Rep. 8.5). The relevance of the oracle for the advancement of plot or character generally was of far greater interest to these authors than an attempt to explain
Nowhere does Herodotus indicate that the oracle given by the Pythia requires an additional interpretation or versification by the male priests or prophets of the shrine.

The only remaining narrative accounts of the Pythia’s madness come from the Christian authors John Chrysostom and Origen whose highly disparaging remarks against pagan divination call into question the veracity of their descriptions. John Chrysostom’s account radically sexualizes the process of the Pythia’s possession. According to Chrysostom, the Pythia, legs spread apart (διαρρούσα τὰ σκέλη), accepts an evil spirit (πνεῦμα πονηρόν) slipping through her generative parts (διὰ τῶν γεννητικῶν αὐτῆς διαδυόμενου μορίων). Once possessed, the Pythia is maddened, as he relates: “disheveling her hair she was excited to Bacchic frenzy and sent forth foam from her mouth and, acting drunk in this way, she spoke words of madness” (ταύτην τὰς τρίχας λύουσαν λοιπὸν ἐκβακχεύεσθαι τε, καὶ ἀφρόν ἐκ τοῦ στόματος ἀφιέναι, καὶ οὐτως ἐν παροιμίᾳ γενομένη τὰ τῆς μανίας φθέγγεσθαι ῥήματα).  

Origen, similarly, focuses upon the characterization of the Pythia’s possession as sexual in kind. He states that the prophetic spirit of Apollo entered the Pythia through her womb (κόλπων), demonstrating the impure and profane (ἀκάθαρτον καὶ βέβηλον) nature of this spirit. He demonizes the prophetic force at Delphi, labeling the workings of the Delphic shrine, hardly a mystery to their audience. It is only with later authors, such as Plutarch, that we see a general fascination with the process of oracular formulation as such and, thus, greater attention to the Pythia’s performative role.

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20 John Chrysostom Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians 29.170.

21 Origen Contra Celsum 7.3. Interestingly, Origen does not discount the reality of possession phenomenon nor does he discount oracles as ineffective per se, he simply demonizes the source and purpose of such possession.
these spirits “hostile to men” (πνεύματα ἐχθρὰ τῷ γένει τῶν ἄνθρωπων) and a hindrance to the soul seeking purity and closeness to god. As further proof of the profane nature of the Pythia’s possession, Origen contrasts the Pythia’s ecstatic and manic state (τὸ ἔκστασιν καὶ μανικήν κατάστασιν) with the beneficial influence of the Holy Spirit. He argues that the Pythia is in no way conscious of herself (μηδαμῶς αὐτὴν ἑαυτῇ παρακλουθεῖν) when possessed unlike Christians who become clearer in mind and more magnificent in both soul and body (διορατικῶτεροί τε τῶν νοῶν ἐγίνοντο καὶ τήν ψυχήν λαμπρότεροι ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ σῶμα) while under the influence of the Holy Spirit. While Origen mentions a few substantiated details about the Pythia (such as her status as an uneducated, common woman), his account is so divergent from normal accounts in significant details (Origen’s Pythia prophesies from the Castalian cave rather than the temple of Apollo, the spirit enters the Pythia through her sexual organs) and is so blatantly skewed toward a Christian perspective so as to render the text patently unreliable. The only other account that supports Origen’s fantastic description is John Chrysostom’s equally fantastic and problematic diatribe. The sexual nature of the Pythia’s possession state and its frenzied result owes more to anti-pagan sentiment than any ritual reality.

22 Origen Contra Celsum 7.3.

23 Origen Contra Celsum 7.3-4.

24 This seems to be the sense of ἔξισταται καὶ οὐκ ἐν ἑαυτῇ ἐστὶν Πυθία, as well. (Origen Contra Celsum 7.4).

25 Origen Contra Celsum 7.3-4.
Despite the problems inherent in an interpretation of the Pythia’s possession state as maddened and raving, early scholars ferociously clung to this assessment. The theory accorded well with Roman-era narratives of pharmacological triggers for the Pythia’s “intoxicated” possession state. The waters of the Kassotis spring, for instance, were connected by later writers to the Pythia’s possessed state.\textsuperscript{26} Although water certainly had a ritual function at Delphi, as did water at Klaros and Didyma, there is nothing to suggest that it was used at Delphi for its specifically intoxicating effects.\textsuperscript{27} Other late sources suggested that the chewing of laurel leaves induced the possessed state.\textsuperscript{28} Yet laurel leaves, which have a slight amount of prussic acid, have no significant intoxicating effects even when consumed in large quantities. The most frequently attested source of the Pythia’s altered state of consciousness (in both ancient and modern accounts) was a subterranean gas which supposedly came into the adyton of the temple of Apollo where the Pythia prophesied.\textsuperscript{29} Strabo describes this phenomenon as a spirit or breath (pneuma) of inspiration (πνεῦμα ἐνθοσιαστικὸν) rising from a chasm deep in the ground.

\textsuperscript{26} Pausanias 10.24.7.

\textsuperscript{27} See H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell 1956:27-28. For the use of water at Klaros and Didyma (though not at Delphi) see Iamblichos De Mysteriis 3.11.

\textsuperscript{28} Lucian Bis Accusatus 1

\textsuperscript{29} In modern theory, the presence of Delphic vapors has been widely rejected due to the French excavations of the site which yielded no cracks, fissures or chasms on the floor of the temple nor any hint of intoxicating fumes. Although recent geological investigations have renewed the possibility of Delphic vapors, it seems probable that whatever vapors were present, if any, cannot in themselves account for the Pythia’s oracular performance, since intoxication alone cannot account for the full cultural nuance of possession practice. For a geological discussion of Delphic vapors and their possible pharmacological effects, see H.A. Spiller, et. Al. 2002:189-196.
Iamblichos, similarly, describes a subterranean source (ἀπὸ στομίου) for the subtle and fiery *pneuma* (πνεύματος λεπτοῦ καὶ πυρώδους) which inspired the Pythia. Pliny, in a geological discussion of gaseous vents, cites Delphi as an example of a prophetic cave (*faticicus specus*) which gives off vapors (*exhalatio*). Of these accounts, Pliny’s alone asserts that the vapor is intoxicating (*temulentus*), the others merely state that it facilitates the inspiration of the god.

Diodorus Siculus, in a narrative explaining the use of the tripod at Delphi, alludes to the Delphic vapor’s intoxicating effects as Pliny. Diodorus states that any goat grazing around the Delphic chasm, “would leap extraordinarily and send forth a sound different than that which it was accustomed to emit before (σκιρτὰν θαυμαστῶς καὶ προϊσθαι φωνὴν διάφορον ἢ πρῶτον εἶσθει φθέγγεσθαι).” This phenomenon aroused the curiosity of the goatherds who, when near the chasm, began to foretell the future. When word spread about the site’s prophetic powers, throngs of men placed themselves under the influence of the vapors, some being brought to such a point of inspiration (ἐνθουσισμὸς) that they threw themselves into the subterranean chasm never to be seen.

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30 Strabo *Geography* 9.3.5.

31 Iamblichos *De Mysteriis* 3.11

32 Pliny *Naturalis Historia* 2.95.208.

33 This is in line with the nature of Pliny’s discussion concern geological features which produce toxic vapors.

34 Diodorus Siculus 16.26.2.
again.\textsuperscript{35} Thinking it best to subject one woman alone to such a risk rather than hoards of men, they established the Pythia as the prophetic priestess and bade her sit upon the tripod so that she could safely give her responses without falling to her demise.\textsuperscript{36}

Although Diodorus indicates that Delphic vapors produced behavioral modifications in both goats and human visitors, we should be wary of using this observation to make wider generalizations about Delphic practice. The details fit far too neatly into the rationalizing tone of the \textit{aition}. The goat's extraordinary bleating and frantic movements, as fictionalized by Diodorus, draw from the realities of Delphic sacrificial practice—the goat was expected to shake violently from head to toe before it was killed.\textsuperscript{37} We should not expect that subterranean vapors, if at all extant, intoxicated nearby goats, goatherds or visitors to Delphi. Moreover, the inspired behaviors of the male visitors who fell into the chasm provides a rationale for the use of the tripod at the shrine (the stated purpose for Diodorus' digression) and the establishment of the Pythia herself as the prophetic priestess. Here again we should not suspect the reality of intoxication so much as narrative convenience and the \textit{ex post facto} rationalization of ritual practice. To parse Diodorus' account for extractable nuggets of historically accurate information is, in large part, to miss the point of the narrative. Diodorus presents the story not as an historical account concerning the procedures of the Delphic shrine but as a demonstration of the antiquity of the tripod through popular narrative, a

\textsuperscript{35} Diodorus Siculus 16.26.3-4.

\textsuperscript{36} Diodorus Siculus 16.26.4-5.

\textsuperscript{37} Plutarch \textit{De Defectu Oraculorum} 437b.
point directly related to the Delphic consultation of Philomelus with which the larger narrative is concerned.

The narrative itself was particularly popular among later authors for explaining the origins of the Delphic shrine. Pausanias, for instance, briefly mentions this myth, though his language speaks of simple inspiration, not intoxication, and omits both the protective tripod and the oddly bleating goats. Plutarch, likewise, provides a narrative variation that includes no hint of intoxication. The story, as Plutarch claims, was in circulation among the most learned men of Delphi and told of a certain shepherd, Koretas by name, who had chanced upon the power of Delphi (described earlier as a stream ἐπέμυτα] released from the earth) and, as a result, had spoken prophetic utterances. Plutarch, however, remains highly skeptical of a purely pharmacological reading of inspiration that asserts wholly rationalistic and naturalistic causes for prophesy at Delphi. What, indeed, would be the point of establishing the Pythia as the prophetic priestess and of going to the trouble to guard her purity if anyone, simply by inhaling earthly vapors, could attain inspiration and foretell the future?

38 Pausanias 10.5.7. ἐνθαδε τε ἐγένευντο ὑπὸ τοῦ ἄτμου καὶ ἐμεύσαντο ἐξ ᾿Απόλλωνος ([the shepherds] became inspired by the vapor and prophesied from Apollo).

39 ἐμπεσόντας here (433c), as ἐμπεσόντα later (435d), is often translated “fell in” rather than “chanced upon.” While both are acceptable dictionary translations for the aorist participle of ἐμπέπτω, the former suggests the idea of a Delphic chasm which is nowhere described by Plutarch. Moreover, “chanced upon” fits better the sense of the phrase κατὰ τύχην “by accident” which follows the participle at 433c. Fontenrose notes the ambiguity but, ultimately, comes to the same reading (1978:200-201).

40 Plutarch De Defectu Oraculorum 433c, 435d.

41 Plutarch De Defectu Oraculorum 435d.
Plutarch’s theory of Delphic inspiration is ultimately a blend of naturalistic explanations with divine causes. While the power of the spirit (τοῦ πνεύματος δύναμις) came directly from the gods, according to Plutarch, neither its strength nor its frequency were consistent; it did not effect all persons in the same way every time.\(^{42}\) This “power” acted as a natural phenomenon and was altered by rains, storms and earthquakes.\(^{43}\) Yet it was not the vapor in itself that produced inspiration. As the sun is to vision, producing light which enables the eye to see, so vapors were to prophecy, disposing the soul towards inspiration and visions of the future.\(^{44}\) The gods and demigods acted as guardians of this inspiration and overseers of the Delphic shrine, their presence demonstrated dramatically through rituals of sacrifice which marked the auspiciousness of Delphic prophesy.\(^{45}\) Neoplatonic speculations aside, what Plutarch makes forcefully clear is that the phenomenon of possessed prophesy at Delphi was governed as much by the logic and rationality of religion as by whatever naturalistic forces enabled its existence. The belief in Apollo as the source of prophetic knowledge justified prophetic practice at Delphi and rendered the system authoritative and legitimate. Without Apollo, the operations of Delphi would have been wholly inconceivable.\(^{46}\)

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\(^{42}\) Plutarch *De Defectu Oraculorum* 438c-d. Plutarch notes, in another passage, that the exhalation (sweet scented like a costly perfume) is noticed periodically inside the temple by men waiting to consult the oracle (*De Defectu Oraculorum* 437c).

\(^{43}\) Plutarch *De Defectu Oraculorum* 434b-c.

\(^{44}\) Plutarch *De Defectu Oraculorum* 433d-e.

\(^{45}\) Plutarch *De Defectu Oraculorum* 436f-437c.

\(^{46}\) As made apparent by Ammonius’ objections (Plutarch *De Defectu Oraculorum* 435e).
Although Pliny and Diodorus Siculus indicate the presence of intoxicating vapors at Delphi, these descriptions function more clearly as rhetorical and narrative arguments rather than statements of verifiable historical fact. Strabo, Iamblichos, Pausanias and Plutarch, who all mention Delphic vapors, omit their “intoxicating” effects. Plutarch, who provides the most extended discussion of Delphic vapors, never suggests a Pythia who is uncontrolled, intoxicated or otherwise bodily afflicted because of her exposure to subterranean gases.\(^{47}\) Yet even when theories of intoxication had all but been rejected by modern scholarship, the play of male-controlled Delphic power was hypothesized through alternative mechanisms. Parke and Wormell, for example, assert that “the confused and disjointed remarks of a hypnotized woman [the Pythia] must have needed considerable exercise of imagination to reduce them to the form of a response.”\(^{48}\) While Parke and Wormell are purely speculative regarding the actual mechanism of male control, they assert that “the history of Delphi shows sufficient traces of a consistent policy to convince one that human intelligence at some point could play a deciding part in the process,”\(^{49}\) though apparently not the “human intelligence” of the Pythia. The entrance of male control was often seen in either oracular versification or the direct

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\(^{47}\) The only example Plutarch provides of a manic Pythia comes as a result of improper attention to pre-consultation procedures. See beginning of this chapter, Plutarch *De Defectu Oraculorum* 438a-b.


influence of male functionaries over the suggestible and naïve Pythia or over the communication of the oracle itself.\textsuperscript{50}

Though making no explicit statement regarding the political nature of oracles, McLeod vehemently defends the notion that poetic versification was wholly in the hands of male prophets at the shrine. Homeric and Hesiodic phrases littered throughout preserved verse oracles led him to postulate the existence of an oral bard at Delphi. Yet he quickly rejects the notion that such a versifier could be the Pythia herself, due to her gender and lack of formal training.\textsuperscript{51} However, details about the lives of women in antiquity are notoriously fragmentary and the Pythia, though better attested than most, is no exception. We can know neither the extent to which the Pythia was trained formally or informally in the poetic arts nor the extent to which this training would be necessary for the performance of her duties.\textsuperscript{52} There is no suggestion that the ability of the Pythia to prophecy in verse presented any contradiction for the ancient Greek. Herodotus and Plutarch, our two most voluminous writers on the Delphic shrine, directly insist upon the Pythia's poetic capacity.\textsuperscript{53} Unfortunately, McLeod's theory discounts the direct accounts

\textsuperscript{50} Parke and Wormell speculate on these possibilities (1956:33-34, 39-40).

\textsuperscript{51} W. E. McLeod 1961:320.

\textsuperscript{52} B. Goff more recently suggests the possibility that the Pythia was trained through a formal apprenticeship, although her concern is more specifically with the Pythia's cultic and political training rather than with her versification of responses. Here again we enter into the realm of pure speculation. (2004:223-224).

\textsuperscript{53} See specifically Herodotus 1.47, 1.65-67, 7.220; Plutarch \textit{De Pythiae Oraculis} 396f, 397c, 403f, 405d; and Pausanias 10.5.7 (who states that the first Pythia, Phemonoe, gave oracles in hexameters). Although Plutarch, as cited above, suggests the Pythia's overall lack of formal training, this presents no contradiction to the Pythia's ability to versify.
of Herodotus, Euripides, Plutarch, Lucan, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Pausanias who all, without fail, cite the Pythia as speaker of Delphic oracles, both poetic and prose.

McLeod’s dismissal of this textual evidence is framed as a form of Delphic non-disclosure which, ironically, elucidates the main problem involved in the addition of male versifiers:

No doubt most people thought of the Pythia as the source of verse oracles. Naturally, it would never do to advertise that there were men who could tamper with the words of the god’s mouthpiece.\(^4\)

The matter, however, is not one of advertisement (or propaganda, as some scholars claim). The construction of objectivity and authenticity is less a product of what the shrine says through myths and legends (insofar as the shrine can even control the creation and dissemination of such narratives), than what the shrine does to demonstrate the real and direct presence of the god’s inspiration through ritual practice. An alteration in the oracle’s form or content by a male versifier after consultation calls into question the Pythia’s utterance itself as inspired speech, throwing the very authority and legitimacy of the oracular response into doubt. Why, indeed, would the voice of Apollo require such an intervention? Writings as early as Theognis warn against the alteration of oracular texts\(^5\) and it is difficult to imagine that a practice of oracular alteration through versification would have flourished at an institutional shrine such as Delphi unquestioned and uncritiqued within the textual record.

\(^4\) W. E. McLeod 1961:320, emphasis added.

\(^5\) Theognis 809-10. οὔτε τι γὰρ προσθεὶς οὐδὲν κ’ ἔτι φάρμακον εὕροις, οὐδ’ ἀφελῶν πρὸς θεῶν ἀμπλακήν προφυγοῖς (For having added [to the oracle] you can no longer find any remedy nor when you depart can you avoid offense against the god.).
Overall, McLeod’s supporting evidence is thin. Although Plutarch himself takes a highly critical stance against men who “needlessly bestow upon [oracles] tragic gravity and pretension” (τραγῳδίαν αὐτοῖς καὶ ὁγκὸν οὐδὲν δευμένοις προσθέντες),\(^{56}\) McLeod uses Plutarch’s discussion to indicate the presence of male versifiers in the service of the shrine. The core problem in McLeod’s reading is that he pays very little attention to the framing context of Plutarch’s statements which are couched within a larger discussion of the process by which poetic oracles fell into disrepute. In the passage, Plutarch states that,

πολλῶν δ’ ἦν ἀκουεῖν ὅτι ποιητικοὶ τίνες ἀνδρεὶς ἐκδεχόμενοι τὰς φωνὰς καὶ ύπολαμβάνουτες ἐπικάθηναι περὶ τὸ χρηστήριον, ἐπὶ καὶ μέτρα καὶ ρυθμοὺς οἴον ἀγγεία τοῖς χρησμοῖς ἐκ τοῦ προστυχόντος περιπλέκουτες.

It was frequently rumored that certain poetic men sat awaiting the words spoken and seized upon the oracular response, men who complicated the words and meters and rhythms out of the encountered response as containers for the oracles.\(^{57}\) Yet Plutarch refers to this versification neither as the normal process of oracular consultation nor as the task of Delphic functionaries. These “poetic” men, similar to Onomakritos,\(^{58}\) Prodikos and Kinaithon, versified oracles for their own use, not for

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\(^{56}\) Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 407b-c.

\(^{57}\) Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 407b.

\(^{58}\) Herodotus shares with Plutarch a less than flattering portrait of Onomakritos. Herodotus mentions Onomakritos as an Athenian oracle-monger (χρησμολόγος) and collector (lit. arranger, διαθέτης) of the oracles of Musaeus. Onomakritos, he claims, was banished from Athens because of a scandal concerning the insertion of lines into a text of Musaeus (Herodotus 7.6).
consultants to the shrine and certainly not as Delphic functionaries. Further, as Plutarch makes clear, the practice of giving oracles in verse had abated by his own day, rendered suspect by the poetic language used in the fraudulent oracular compositions of itinerant priests. Whereas poetic, ambiguous and riddling speech was once valued as a means of demonstrating the inspiration of the divine, the dominant communicative form of Plutarch’s day had become clear and direct prose. Plutarch, moreover, rejects the primacy of verse oracles at any date, suggesting that oracles given in the past were either in verse or prose, but at no time ever solely in verse.

Even if a Delphic priest or prophet took on the role of versification, his control over oracles would remain, at best, limited. This limitation on male control is seen directly in McLeod’s second proof taken from Strabo’s Geography. In this work, Strabo briefly mentions the process of consultation at Delphi,

\[ \text{ὑπερκείσθαι δὲ τοῦ στομίου τρίποδα ύψηλόν, ἐφ’ ὄν τὴν Πυθίαν ἀναβαίνουσαν δεχομένην τὸ πνεῦμα ἁπαθετίζειν ἐμμετρά τε καὶ ἀμέτρα, ἐνείειν δὲ καὶ ταύτα εἰς μέτρον ποιητάς τινας ὑπογρούντας τῷ ἱερῷ.} \]

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59 Although the phrase ποιητικὸι τινὲς ἄνδρες is sufficiently vague that it could refer to “priests” or “prophets”, the decidedly unflattering comparison of such versifiers with Onomakritos et al. suggests an alternate reading. Viewing these versifiers, moreover, as functionaries of the shrine lacks internal coherence with Plutarch’s assertion of the Pythia’s full control over the meter and diction of her oracular utterances (De Pythiae Oraculis 397c). See Fontenrose 1978:213-214.

60 Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 407c.

61 Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 404a-b, 405e, 406b-407f.

62 Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 404a-b, Plutarch notes that the number of poetic oracles in the past was relatively slight (403e-f).
. . . the lofty tripod lies above the mouth [of the cave] and the Pythia, going up onto it, receives the pneuma and prophecies in both poetry and prose: but these [prose oracles] also are rendered into meter by certain poets serving the temple.\textsuperscript{63}

Notably, Strabo characterizes the Pythia herself as the speaker of prose and verse oracles. Clearly in this text, as in many others, the Pythia is capable of producing poetic oracles and readily does so. It is only the prose oracles, further, which are subject to versification by the temple poets. Even if Strabo’s account is accepted as accurate, it provides very little room for the male functionary to shape the content of the oracular response. The men of the shrine, at best, would have only marginal control over the form and content of the prose oracles alone.\textsuperscript{64}

We are left, then, with one final theory concerning male control over oracular speech—direct male influence over the content of Delphic oracles. While theories explaining male control through translation and versification postulate an alteration of the oracle after the Pythia’s performance, theories of direct influence situate this male intrusion into the very frame of the oracle’s preparation and utterance. This eliminates, to all outward appearances, the mechanics of a two step process where the Pythia, then male functionaries, give the oracle to the consultant. Yet this also renders the Pythia far more opaque and indistinct as an actor at Delphi.

\textsuperscript{63} Strabo \textit{Geography} 9.3.5.

\textsuperscript{64} Fontenrose links this description to the passage taken from Plutarch above. The assertion that Strabo is referring to the same sort of versifiers as Plutarch is highly suspect since Strabo refers to them as “poets serving the temple”. See J. Fontenrose 1978:213.
Whittaker, in one extreme statement of this theory, asserts that the image of the Pythia directly communicating with the consultant is not proven as “we might suppose from Herodotus.” The confusion in our textual sources is not due to “deliberate reticence or fraud” but rather to the unfortunate circumstance of our lack of textual evidence, presumably of the type that would confirm Whittaker’s argument. The Pythia plays no active part in Whittaker’s reconstruction, for she is neither the clear performer of oracles nor even a babbler of incoherent gibberish. One can only wonder at the prominence of her presence in the textual record since Whittaker ultimately provides no good explanation for discounting the bulk of evidence from Herodotus, Plutarch and other writers who unanimously assert that the Pythia spoke directly to her clients.

The logic of Whittaker’s system is based upon a complex information system, operated fully by the men of the shrine. He supposes that the entire process of interaction prior to consultation was an elaborate system designed by the male priests of Delphi to extract information from consultants concerning the nature and substance of their enquiries. Non-Delphic officials, from the representatives of important poleis serving at Delphi (the proxenoi) to the consultants themselves, served to inform Delphic officials of the international political situation, rendering the shrine able to respond successfully to all matter of political inquiries. Whittaker places full control over the entire process of

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67 C. R. Whittaker 1965:26. I. Malkin similarly emphasizes the importance of information transfer between consultants and functionaries at Delphi, though he does not, as Whittaker, place the prophets in such an active role of information-gathering. Malkin states that, “Delphi apparently functioned as a center and a meeting point... It is
consultation, including the form and annunciation of the final oracular message, in the
hands of the prophētēs, the individual at the very pinnacle of his Delphic political
structure.\(^{68}\)

To illustrate the role of the prophētēs at Delphi, Whittaker takes as his source the
counter interactions in Euripides’ Ion. During this play, the prophētēs Ion, questions at
length the main female character Kreusa. The long string of personal questions in this
exchange is taken as proof by Whittaker of the role of the prophet as a powerful and
politically-minded information gatherer. Yet, in the context of the play, Ion questions
Kreusa because she asks him to be a consultant on her behalf, not because Ion hopes to
obtain further information about anyone consulting the oracle.\(^{69}\) The long string of
questions between Ion and Kreusa ultimately provides Ion with the information he would
have needed to make an oracular consultation on behalf of Kreusa, which he later,
incidentally, refuses to do.\(^{70}\) Narratively, Ion’s questioning provides the audience with

\(^{68}\) C. R. Whittaker 1965:24-25.

\(^{69}\) Kreusa herself could not consult the Pythia because of her gender, as the passage
makes clear. Plutarch confirms this at De E Apud Delphos 385c, καὶ τὸ μηθεμιᾷ
γυναῖκι πρὸς τὸ χρηστήριον εἶναι προσελθεῖν (no woman is allowed to approach

\(^{70}\) Ion judges Kreusa’s inquiry to be inflammatory against Apollo, since it directly
implicates Apollo in the abandonment, and presumed death, of Apollo’s own child. Ion,
for his part, does not wish to provoke the anger of the god, as he tells Kreusa: οὐκ ἐστιν
ὀστὶς σοι προφητεύσει τάδε./ ἐν τοῖς γὰρ αὐτοῦ δῶμαιν κακός φανείς/Φοῖβος
dikaios τοῦ θεοστέουντα σοι/δράσειν ἀν τι πῆμα. ἀπαλλάσσου, γύναι./τῷ
the crucial backstories of Ion, Kreusa and her husband Xuthus and foreshadows the
connections between these characters that will become apparent in the later events of the
play. Kreusa, moreover, elicits no meaningful information on any consultation that
actually takes place within the course of the play, including the consultation of her
husband Xunthus, nor does Ion seek this information. When an oracle is finally revealed
to Kreusa’s husband, Xuthus, Ion disbelieves oracle’s content, an unusual reaction if such
a prophet is actually in control of the content of oracular responses.

While the actual function of the prophètes in Delphi remains poorly understood,
Whittaker’s reconstructions are far from convincing. Xuthus alone, not Ion nor any other
prophètes, controls the only statement and interpretation of the oracle. The only actual
activities that the prophèteis or priests are shown to perform are duties that aid the
various consultants or that maintain the proper functioning of the shrine, such as
overseeing sacrifices before the consultant enters the temple or acting as patrons for those
who cannot consult the oracle themselves.71 Ion’s stated duties as a functionary of the
Delphic shrine include his offer to be a sponsor for Kreusa’s inquiry and his tasks of
purifying the entrance to the temple, frightening birds anxious to eat Apollo’s offerings,

γὰρ θεὸς τάναντι οὐ μαντευτέον. (There is no one who would act as a sponsor for
you. For if Phoebus is shown to be evil in his own home then he would justly enact some
calamity upon the person delivering oracles to you. Leave this, lady. For [an oracle]
must not be divined contrary to the god.) Euripides Ion 369-373.

71 “overseeing sacrifices” see Plutarch De Defectu Oraculorum 438a-b; “patrons to
women” see Euripides Ion, 334-374.
and pouring holy water into a basin.72 These are hardly the tasks of a politically-minded information gatherer.

Ultimately, Whittaker’s reconstruction is built upon a rationalizing understanding of “truth” itself. He argues that for an oracle to be “correct” it must be formed on the basis of an accurate body of knowledge obtained and analyzed in advance by a body of policy makers. What is assumed by this stance, however, is that a prophètes can glean sufficient, reliable intelligence from travelers to Delphi and that this intelligence itself is sufficient for making correct predictions of the future. One need only look so far as our modern nations to recognize that intelligence, even under the best methods of retrieval, can be faulty, mismanaged and misunderstood. These theories require such a fantastic command of information (both gathering and presenting) that such an operation is both logically unattainable and bears little resemblance to the operations of the Delphic shrine as described in the literary record.73

72 Euripides, Ion 333-335, 102-111, and 433-435.

73 Whittaker (1965), for instance, contrasts his fanciful reconstruction of a Delphic information service against a Mwari oracle from Africa. What Whittaker fails to take into account, however, is the scope of the society in which each oracle is operating. While an information service may be a practical means for ensuring accurate oracles in a tribal society, where everyone and their interpersonal relationships can be known, the same process does not transfer to a political structure containing multiple independent and widely disparate government entities. The amount of information required to understand the intricacies of the Pan-Hellenic political situation at any one moment falls far outside the capabilities of a small group of priests to extract information from the hodgepodge of consultants who might happen to visit the shrine at any one time. Moreover, according to the criticisms of Fontenrose, Whittaker is incorrect in several of the features of the Mwari oracle (See Fontenrose 1978:230-231 and his source Daneel 1970.)
Whittaker’s theory, moreover, rests upon the equally dubious assumption that consultants will unabashedly follow the advice of the oracle because it is stated with the authority of the god Apollo. Yet consultants are not likely to relinquish all political power purely on the basis of belief.\textsuperscript{74} This severely limits the ability of the prophet to exercise political influence to the degree theorized by Whittaker. Moreover, an effective propaganda industry, the existence of which at Delphi is dubious, would neither remove the appearance of overt manipulation engendered by such an operation nor obscure the existence of incorrect and problematic oracular analyses.\textsuperscript{75}

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is not knowledge of the future as such that consultants sought through consultation. For what would be the purpose of learning a fate that could not be changed? Divination becomes relevant and useful when it allows the consultant to learn \textit{enough} about the god’s reactions and intentions to ensure that an intended course of action has the prior support of the gods or to understand the divine causes of local crises in order that these may be rectified.\textsuperscript{76} To know the future absolutely would be, as Vernant suggests, to “eclipse the function itself of divination.”\textsuperscript{77} Ultimately, the continued “success” of the oracle can neither be explained through intelligence management nor through a complex political machinery operated at the shrine since

\textsuperscript{74} Chapter 3 develops this point in far greater detail.

\textsuperscript{75} For Whittaker on Delphic propaganda, see 1965:28-29.


\textsuperscript{77} J-P Vernant 1991:310.
intelligence itself is a suspect paradigm, neither what the consultant truly wants nor what the shrine can actually provide.

Indeed, even when the exact role of the priests and prophets is left nebulous, an analysis of "Delphic political policy" is ultimately disappointing. Malkin, for instance, has noted that the pattern of Delphic responses indicates a "progressive" political stance, with the shrine actively supporting "the foundation of new social orders, comprehensive reforms [and] even tyrannies." While there is arguably greater evidence for "progressive" patterns in the textual evidence than for "conservative," theories of Delphic political policy inordinately amplify Delphi's power both to dictate policy to independent political entities and to obscure the place of consultants in the formation of political responses.

The pattern of "progressive" oracular responses is fully explicable when examined within the context of queries brought to the shrine. Consultants had no need to consult the oracle concerning the maintenance of the established political, social and religious order. Inquiries were brought before the oracle when a community experienced an irresolvable crisis or when proposed changes could not be fully authorized by the established political and religious structures of a community. The fact that Delphi supported change is hardly impressive in this light. If most political questions posed to

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78 I. Malkin 1989:130.

79 H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormald, for instance, note the "general conservatism" of the Delphic shrine yet provide scarce little evidence to support this assumption (see 1956:18). In a revealing though self-contradictory admission they note that, "One would expect a somewhat conservative outlook from an old established religious institution, but actually there is no sign that the Delphic priesthood ever attempted to block the course of political change" (1956:419).
Delphi concerned changes to the current order, either originating from outside pressures or proposed from within, Delphi would have demonstrated a politically “progressive” stance simply by supporting consultant inquiries. We need not imagine a standardized political policy nor a group of Delphic policy makers to explain the “progressive” nature of oracular replies. The shrine did not guide the political actions of consultants, but rather provided the service of divine authorization, a guarantee that the action about to be undertaken would have the support of the gods.80

Overall, evidence for the communicative and political control of oracles on the part of male functionaries at Delphi is limited, problematic, and centered on rationalizing assumptions and expectations rather than on a close reading of the full textual record. There is very little reason to doubt the majority of ancient sources that highlight the Pythia’s clear and lucid performance of oracles and conspicuously omit any direct role of Delphic male functionaries in the formulation and manipulation of (much less the political influence over) oracular responses. Yet in all but the most recent scholarship on Delphi, the Pythia is marginalized: either physically, incapable of oracular performance through her manic state; or artistically, deficient in the skills of poetic improvisation; or operationally, rendered invisible by the overt play of male-controlled intelligence.81


81 This is a point that Maurizio makes but, ultimately, to different ends (see 1995:72, 84-86). While we both agree upon the Pythia’s communicative role, Maurizio’s reading of the Pythia’s power is problematic, as I discuss in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 2

PERFORMANCE AND THE PYTHIA

Ironically, the marginalization of the Pythia’s communicative role discussed in
Chapter 1 occurs through the terms of her identifying traits. In the first place, her lack of
education is used to justify the existence of educated males as versifiers of oracular texts.
In the second, her ritual seclusion (though not explicitly argued in these terms) set the
Pythia apart from the world of gossip and politics to which the priests and prophets had
access through their interactions with visitors. Scholars drawing upon feminist
anthropology, such as Maurizio, have recently criticized the academic marginalization of
the Pythia’s ritual and communicative role. Such discussions reject the communicative
and political power of Delphic male functionaries and suggest that the Pythia, through her
prophetic position, held resistive power analogous to the political and religious power
wielded by women in modern possession cults cross-culturally.82 Yet, as the
androcentric theories before, feminist theories do not take full account of the Pythia’s
identifying traits and their implications for the creation of objectivity in possession
performance.

82 L. Maurizio 1995:75. B. Goff 2004:282 briefly mentions this point as well. For
women’s resistive powers in modern possession cults, see E. Bourguignon 2004.
Although it is generally true that women in modern possession cults can gain access to restricted areas of cultural practice and communicative expression in highly patriarchal societies, the manner in which this resistive power is expressed and maintained varies widely and is predicated on relevant social, geographic, political, economic, and religious factors.\textsuperscript{83} Maurizio, however, takes little account of the relevant contextual differences that separate the practice of spirit possessed divination at Delphi from modern spirit possession cults and instead asserts a totalizing analogy of gendered practice, possessed communication, and patriarchal political power.\textsuperscript{84} The direct translation of possessed communication into political power, necessary for her theory of the Pythia’s resistive power, is problematic even when tempered with cross-cultural evidence.\textsuperscript{85} This connection lacks depth and nuance, ultimately romanticizing the agency of possessed women and homogenizing the play of political power and possession practice.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{83} L. Maurizio 1995:75. See also Bourguignon 2004:559 and Boddy 1994:415-416.

\textsuperscript{84} As E. Bourguignon notes, the interpretation of related possession cults practiced in similar societies can be quite divergent based on the relevant diversity in “historical circumstances, including the economy and the political and the social structure of the society, the position of women within it, and the larger context of religious and healing practices, among others.” (see 2004:560-562).

\textsuperscript{85} L. Maurizio is insistent upon the connection, suggesting that the exclusion of the Pythia’s speech from political discourse, among other faulty reconstructions, is a rendering of the Pythia as “ancillary to the process of divination at Delphi.” (1995:72). See also B. Goff 2004:221.

\textsuperscript{86} Similar criticisms have been noted more generally of resistance theories. See, in particular, Ortner 1995:176-177, 179 and Abu-Lughod 1990:41-42.
In modern possession cults, resistive power is often exercised in local contexts where women can rely upon established familial or social relationships.\(^{87}\) The concerns observed in possession cults surround issues of health care, reproduction, marriage, and social and kin ties, particularly within the context of inadequate or disappearing support systems or significant social change.\(^{88}\) The powers received through possession serve to aid women themselves, their families, and their communities. These social ties and relationships are often central to the practice of spirit possession, as they define the community within which possession is enacted. It is this audience of community members who determines how far inspired communication is accepted and if or how it is acted upon within the social sphere.\(^{89}\)

Delphic consultation, on the other hand, was open to a wide number of inquirers from the ancient Mediterranean world. Its business was limited only by the geographical borders of its fame and the extent that individuals were willing to travel. The Pythia’s consultants remained largely unknown and unknowable to the ritually isolated and

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\(^{87}\) Where relationships are not “natural” in type, based on biological relation or a bounded geographic and social community (a village for example), possession cults will often introduce a vocabulary of kin or social relationships. For example, vodou cult in Haiti is practiced within one’s own extended family group, each member linked by a network of obligations and expectations. When the practice of vodou migrated to the U.S. with immigrant populations, groups were often comprised of individuals largely unrelated by descent. Yet, even so, the family ties native to vodou practice were replicated within social relations, each member addressed by terms of kinship and bound by commitments to the others in the group (K.M. Brown 2001:47-48.) Boddy also cites relevant literature on the use of kin terminology as descriptors for cult leaders and members (1994:416).

\(^{88}\) J. Boddy 1994:416.

\(^{89}\) G.K. Park 1963:198.
anonymous Pythia.\textsuperscript{90} Lacking strong local ties with her consultants, the Pythia lacked, as well, the types of social obligations and relationships that often underlie the play of resistive female power within spirit possession practice. The Pythia prophesied to men primarily outside her own community, who could do little to aid her socially, religiously, or politically within Delphi even had they cared to do so. Although domestic concerns such as illness, marriage, birth, and death were broached during Delphic consultations, it was the consultant’s needs, not the Pythia’s, that set the topical frame for discourse. The contexts of the consultant’s own family and community, not the Pythia’s, held prominence of place at Delphic consultations.

Ultimately, Maurizio’s model, as the androcentric theories discussed in Chapter 1, does not adequately address the meanings of the Pythia’s gender, social status and political power as culturally specific and necessary facets of her public identity. Although the rationale that connected the Pythia’s advanced age, peasant status, female gender, social seclusion, chastity, lack of education and virginal costuming\textsuperscript{91} may not be

\textsuperscript{90} The Pythia was almost always termed the “Pythia” or the “Prophetic Priestess” and rarely was referred to by her proper name. Though this may simply be a peculiar feature of our textual evidence, it seems to indicate a greater concern with the Pythia as an oracular institution than the Pythia as an individual woman. Of the Pythiae for whom we are given a common name, one, Periellas, is implicated in charges of corruption (Herodotus 6.66, though not at Herodotus 5.63, 5.66 or Thucydides 5.16), another, Aristonike, gives the Athenians the “wooden walls” oracle on the eve of the Persian attack (Herodotus 7.140), and another, Phemonoe, was the legendary first Pythia (Pausanias 10.5.7, also Lucan Pharsalia 5.126). See H.W. Parke and D.E.W. Wormell 1956:36.

\textsuperscript{91} Poor/Common/Uneducated: Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 405c, Origen Contra Celsum 7.6; Elderly: Aeschylus Eumenides 38, Euripides Ion 1339 and 1358, Diodorus Siculus 16.26.6; Ritually Secluded: Plutarch De Defectu Oraculorum 435d and 438c; Bride-like/Virginal: Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 405c, Diodorus Siculus 16.26.6.
immediately obvious to the modern scholar; the native logic of the Pythia’s operation is 
directly dependent upon these traits. Otherwise, why not substitute either a young male 
aristocrat or a socially and politically active woman as the mouthpiece of the god? The 
mere possibility would be unthinkable to the Ancient Greek, yet this is the sort of 
substitution by which theories of Delphic-centered political power operate—they 
substitute the politically “deficient” Pythia for an able and active man or a politically 
resistive Pythia. Yet insofar as “the Pythia” as an institution and as an individual is 
marked by a valid, consistent, and recognizable set of culturally-specific traits, these 
should be viewed as intentional categories of identity. These are traits which should be 
explained, as much as possible, within the logic of Greek political systems and Delphic 
operations, and not within our own modern expectations and scholarly rationales.

The dynamic interrelationship between possessed performance at Delphi and the 
divinatory function of oracular messages is often omitted from modern theories of 
Delphic power. Every theory that I have discussed thus far assumes that an 
understanding of oracular performance will elucidate the divinatory mechanism (often 
seen as the direct manipulation of oracular responses by the functionary in question). Yet 
it is simplistic to think that the possession performance will not be influenced by the 
divinatory function which legitimates its very existence. The divinatory response of the 
Pythia required the recognized performance of spirit possession in order to demonstrate 
the presence of Apollo and to legitimate the oracle as the word of the divine. On the 
other hand, the practice of spirit possession would be hollow and purposeless without the 
promise of prophesy as its reward.
The separation of divination from spirit possession in modern scholarship on Delphi stems partially from the fact that divination and spirit possession typically are separate systems of religious and social practice cross-culturally. The majority of divinatory systems rely upon either “non-interpersonal,” natural phenomena—flights of birds, entrails of sacrificial animals, patterns in tortoise shells, patterns in tea leaves—or “interpersonal,” “randomizing” devices—dice, lots, tarot cards. Spirit possession, on the other hand, is practiced mainly by women in patriarchal societies as a means of resistive power or as an expression of social and political powerlessness. Spirit possessed divination, similar to yet distinct from systems of “divination” or “spirit possession” as singular practices, is often undertheorized as a coherent and interconnected system.

Maurizio draws from anthropological paradigms of divination and of spirit possession without problematizing meaningfully the interaction between these two systems at Delphi. She looses, through this conflation of disparate theories, part of the logic and nuance of possessed divination. Maurizio sidelines the influence of the Pythia’s divinatory function on performance when she conflates the Pythia’s communicative power with the resistive powers expressed by women in modern possession cults. Although Maurizio eventually broaches the topic of divination, she forces the possession traits of the Pythia into an anthropological model of “mechanical

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92 I borrow the terminology from E. Ahern 1981:45-63.

divination,” ultimately unsuited to the Pythia’s unique position as a spirit possessed diviner.94

Maurizio’s theory of Delphic divination draws directly from Ahern’s concept of “randomization,” first developed in regard to Chinese divinatory systems. Maurizio claims that randomization explains the mechanism through which spirit possession is marked as divine speech and rendered objective and legitimate, using the human body itself as the randomizing device. She states that, “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.”95 This extension of Ahern’s theory, however, is untenable.

To apply randomization to the Pythia, in Ahern’s sense, is to imply that her possession state (indicated through her body and/or voice) involves a direct mechanism of chance. Insofar as the Pythia’s possession state is marked throughout the divinatory session, randomization, with its emphasis upon chance mechanisms, would render the Pythia unable to manipulate the course or outcome of her possession behaviors so long as

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94 All too often, spirit possessed divination is aligned functionally with mechanical “randomizing” divination without fully explaining or accounting for the essential differences in each system. Although Park alludes to “ritual or emotive dramatization” (possession, among other things) in divination as functionally equivalent to the drama provided through a “randomizing mechanism”, he provides no example of such a system nor analysis of its dramatic operation nor proof of its functional similarity to mechanical systems (G.K. Park 1963:202). DuBois, similarly, links the two systems, suggesting that spirit possessed divination, like mechanical divination, relies upon a system of intentionless meaning, although this observation is relegated to a tantalizing but underdeveloped footnote (J.W. DuBois 1992:70n8).

she was possessed, thereby removing actual volition from the Pythia. Although Maurizio concludes that the Pythia had a strong and powerful communicative role, randomization as a possession mechanism ultimately contradicts this stance because it leaves no room for the Pythia to manipulate the form or content of her responses.

Spirit possession, lacking this element of chance, is explicitly not included in Ahern's understanding of randomization. As Ahern states,

At some point each of the types of divination involving interpersonal transaction (except possession, where the god uses a human voice to express himself) uses a device that cannot be controlled by human participants: the fall of blocks or coins, the blind choice of numbered sticks, etc. We say this is a randomizing device; . . .

Randomization cannot explain the Pythia's authority nor explain how her claims of spirit possession are legitimized within the social sphere. How, then, might the Pythia's possessed state reduce human volition and remain a meaningful cultural category without recourse to chance phenomenon?

"Twitches", "pains", "dreams", and "voicing" can only be recognized as possession behaviors when these actions fit within cultural categories for interpreting possession, not when these arise by chance occurrence or are truly random behaviors. The performance of a culturally accepted possession state requires adherence to natively understood cultural categories of possessed expression which must be recognizable by

\[96\] Maurizio does not deal directly with the subject of chance in her use of Ahern's category of "randomization," focusing instead on power of randomization to remove authorial agency and create objectivity. The element of chance in Ahern's conceptualization of randomization is so vital, however, that its removal constitutes an untenable extension with vital repercussions.

\[97\] E. M. Ahern (1981), 53; emphasis mine.
members of the community and therefore must to a certain extent be predictable.

Moreover, while particular behaviors may be associated with possession behavior their interpretation as possession behavior requires an active exchange between the spirit medium and her audience. Irvine writes,

"... [the interpretive process] is a creative process, not merely residing in the symbolic forms taken by interpreted behavior itself—important as those forms and their cultural matrix are—but also drawing upon the witnesses’ own motives, and their knowledge of setting, personal histories, and surrounding events."\(^{98}\)

Any particular form that possession carries as a performance, even when consistently understood within a community, is not sufficient for the creation of meaning.\(^{99}\) Although behaviors like code-switching often signal the transformation from a normal to a possessed state these behaviors are not essential and universal markers of possession in every community. As an illustration of this point, Irvine cites the example of Quaker divinely-inspired speech where the situational context, rather than the communicative code, distinguishes religious speech from “normal” speech. While the Quaker inspired speech is not an instance of spirit possession, it demonstrates, nevertheless, the role of extralinguistic forces in marking communication as religiously charged for a particular community. Ultimately, whatever is used to mark the possession state must be predicated not only off a social history of its use, but this usage must further be contextualized against a background of the spatial and temporal setting, prior history and consultant motivations.


Even when the rules governing interpretation are culturally consistent, audience motivations and interests can lead to widely divergent interpretations of possession behavior within a cultural group. We should not expect that an individual characteristic of verbal performance, such as versified speech, always carried the same symbolic meanings for geographically disparate consultants inquiring at the Delphic shrine. Since what constitutes a possession state is ultimately predicated on what is interpreted as possession, changes in interpretive contexts, beliefs, and cultural values can alter the very markers of possession. We should not assume that the Pythia’s possession state was marked by a consistent verbal performance over the hundred’s of years of Delphi’s operation.

The process of consultation is ultimately a dynamic one in which expectations are set up against actual performances and individual interests. The process of consultation at Delphi was far from linear or mechanical as previous scholars have been wont to describe it. The creation of objectivity and demonstration of divine inspiration within the oracular session is ultimately a bi-directional communicative process wherein both sides negotiate and potentially contest the boundaries of oracular practice within cultural expectations.

When examined as a conceptual unit, the Pythia’s identifying traits (age, seclusion, gender, social status, lack of education, virginal symbolism\(^{100}\)) all serve to restrict her access to social, economic, and political fields of action and, most importantly, fields of influence. This, I argue, is not accidental or haphazard. The Pythia

\(^{100}\) See page 33 footnote 91.
must be able to communicate without evidencing political bias. In this guise, she would neither be suspected of holding political power nor of consciously influencing the oracular statement. There is neither the need nor the native rationale to substitute male functionaries or a powerful female figure for the ignorant and socially secluded Pythia in the execution of the oracular message. The Pythia’s identity dramatically ensures that it is Apollo’s inspiration that is responsible for the oracle and not human intelligence.

Overall, there was very little room for the Pythia to exercise power effectively, due to the restrictions inherent in the service-oriented, divinatory function of her role. The Pythia’s responses were political only to extent that they were accepted, potentially manipulated, and ultimately enacted by the consultant. Oracles were not independent injunctions. Inquiries rarely focused on open-ended predictions of the future, the type through which the Pythia could most easily direct social action. Often the consultant’s inquiry simply sought an authorization or rejection of an intended course of action or elicited a statement of the god’s preference. ¹⁰¹ Although accounts exist in which the Pythia provided responses that ventured away from the primary topic of inquiry, extemporaneously foreshadowing future tragedy or glory, these generally are mythic or literary in kind and do not express in any direct manner the Pythia’s own desires or social frustrations. There was very little room socially, ritually or communicatively for the Pythia to enhance her own local power, gain access to restricted goods and services, or

¹⁰¹ B. Goff 2004:224 (citing Dewald 1981:125 and Parker 1985:324-26). Though Maurizio does not deny the existence of inquiries where the Pythia provided a mere authorization or rejection of a proposed plan of action, per se, she simply suggests that the Pythia responded both to questions of this limited type and those concerning which the consultant had no definite plan (1995: 70-71, 84).
express social tensions through her possession state. If the Pythia truly held resistive power, it is ultimately unclear to what ends it was exercised. The textual content of oracular responses demonstrates a concern with the political agenda of the consultant rather than the Pythia herself and shows Delphi’s legitimization of, rather than resistance to, dominant political systems. 102

Oddly, Maurizio does not disentangle, nor even recognize, these significant differences in the realized scope and expression of power between modern spirit possession and Delphic divination. Yet rendering the Pythia a strong and viable political force in the ancient Mediterranean world does a disservice, not only to the reality of the Pythia’s possessed communication, but to an understanding of a wider complex of social and political relations governing the play of gender roles and power. The theoretical compression of modern possession’s inter-local power, on the one hand, and Delphi’s extra-local, on the other, serves to homogenize power and subaltern agency within highly disparate cultures. What we lose, in this process, is the peculiarity of Greek political systems (scarcely mentioned within modern analyses of Delphi’s political role103), the unique agency and agenda of the Pythia herself (insofar as this can be deciphered from fragmentary evidence), and the play of cooperation and reciprocity between the Pythia and her clients.104

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102 The Pythia rarely rejected a consultant’s proposal. I will directly address this point in the following chapter.
103 R. Parker (2000) is anomalous in this respect.
104 M.F. Brown generally criticizes the myopia of resistance theories to forms of cooperation and reciprocity (1996:734).
CHAPTER 3

DELPHIC ORACLES, LOCAL ACTION

General critiques of resistance theory, in regard to its handling of political complexity, the varied agencies and agendas of subaltern groups, and the dynamics of cooperation, are not particularly new nor are they wholly singular to the application of feminist theory to antiquity. As Barbara Placido, an anthropologist, suggests, "Religious cults centered on spirit possession do not always need to be non-conservative, counter-hegemonic and rebellious" nor must they be read only as a form of expression by "marginal or otherwise muted groups."105 She argues that theories of resistance in spirit possession tend to neglect the content of possessed communication in favor of an analysis of the context or form of possession episodes.106 This criticism is particularly timely when set against traditional analyses of the Pythia’s power, which have focused on the existence of the Pythia’s direct oracular communication, the prevalent political environment, and her gender, rather than on the realized content of oracles themselves. What is obscured, even by the best of these analyses, is the very raison d’être of

105 B. Placido 2001:221.

possession itself within the community—the content of communication that makes
possession experience natively relevant, meaningful, and explicable. The assumption
that communication is directly linked with resistive power, given the gender and status of
possession participants, is ultimately too simplistic, because it focuses on generalized
contexts of female oppression and patriarchal power rather than on the content of
participants' words and actions, which carries the logic and meanings of the system itself.
Placido notes, "It is not religious cults centered on spirit possession themselves, but what
people do with them, that can mark them as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic."¹⁰⁷

To understand how individuals and communities "do" things with oracles, it is
necessary to journey outside the sphere of Delphi to the local families, communities,
poles, kingdoms, and empires that sought oracular responses and that later transmitted,
interpreted, and enacted these messages.¹⁰⁸ Who, we might ask, shaped the content of the
oracular response? Who guided the oracle's dissemination into communities and
political spheres? Who rendered the oracle as a meaningful, enactable message? Who,
ultimately, utilized political power and authority through the oracle and its transmission?
When the play of oracular messages in Greek society is examined closely, it becomes
clear that the "political policy" of oracles was shaped far more by consultants than by any
text or systematic policy produced by the shrine itself. While Delphi provided authority
for decisions, the decisions themselves were often made well in advance of consultation.
In nearly every part of the oracular procedure from consultation to interpretation to

¹⁰⁷ B. Placido 2001:221, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ R. Parker likewise addresses the question of oracular political power from the
perspective of consultants (2000), though to different ends.
enactment, consultants, not Delphic officials, shaped the oracular message within relevant political spheres, formulating the interpretation of the oracle and deciding on a subsequent course of action.

The play of consultant control is immediately evident within the form and content of oracular inquiries. These inquiries effectively set the topic of discourse and constructed the boundaries of potential relevant responses. For example, in a particularly famous Delphic consultation, Chairephon the Athenian asked the oracle, “Is anyone wiser than Socrates?” In asking this particular question, Chairephon not only set the topic of discourse—the wisdom of Socrates—but effectively limited the creative potential of this discourse to the elaboration of “yes” or “no”, the only two answers logically available to the Pythia within the question frame.\textsuperscript{109} Moreover, the question directly hinged upon the identity and person of Socrates, forcing the Pythia to respond contextually within the terms of the question’s perspective. By contrast, a more ambiguously stated question such as “Who is wisest?” would have provided the Pythia with a near infinite set of possible answers, limited only by the extent of known individuals. Though Chairephon’s consultation is comparatively innocuous in terms of stated power,\textsuperscript{110} this type of inquiry

\textsuperscript{109} I draw upon the account in Plato (\textit{Apology} 21a-c). For further ancient citations, see Fontenrose H3.

\textsuperscript{110} Plato’s Socrates is quite unclear as to why Chairephon was consulting the oracle on this matter.
can be used rhetorically to indicate the response desired and to limit the possibility of undesired contingencies.\textsuperscript{111}  

The consultation of Kleisthenes of Athens concerning his proposed changes to the Athenian tribal system provides a prime example of the consultant advantages rendered possible through effective limitations on topics. Kleisthenes, as Aristotle relates,

\[ \text{Ταῖς δὲ φυλαῖς ἐποίησεν ἐπωνύμους ἐκ τῶν προκριθέντων ἐκάτων ἀρχηγῶν, οὓς ἀνείλευ ἡ Πυθία δέκα.} \]

established eponymous [heroes] for the tribes, the ten which the Pythia selected from a hundred previously chosen heroes.\textsuperscript{112}  

Although we are not given the precise details of Kleisthenes’ question, it is clear that Kleisthenes himself directly shapes the field of potential answers, limiting the Pythia’s response to the hundred previously chosen possibilities.\textsuperscript{113} Moreover, the topical domain of Kleisthenes’ oracle (the naming of the tribes) does not touch upon the very question of

\textsuperscript{111} As Parker relates, “The oracle is seldom expected to suggest lines of conduct on its own initiative, but passes judgment on possibilities put forward by the consultant (‘shall I build my house at X or Y?’)" (2000:77).

\textsuperscript{112} Aristotle \textit{Ath. Pol.} 21.6. (See Malkin 1989:140-2.) Herodotus, notably, does not mention the Pythia’s involvement in the naming of the ten tribes, stating that Kleisthenes came up with these names himself just as his grandfather (also named Kleisthenes) changed the names of the tribes in Sicyon. (See Herodotus 5.66-69). Though it is difficult to determine definitively, the omission of the Pythia’s role in the renaming of the Athenian tribes seems to be acting narratively to strengthen Herodotus’ comparison between the younger Kleisthenes and his older counterpart.

\textsuperscript{113} Some scholars have suggested that this scene may indicate a form of lot divination, kleromancy, otherwise poorly attested at Delphi. The only evidence for this attribution here, however, is the verb \textit{ἀναίρεω} (aor. of \textit{ἀναίρεσις}). In its primary sense \textit{anaiρεō} means “to take up” but can also mean, as likely here, “to give an oracular response”. There is no reason to assume definitively that the Pythia was drawing lots, reading a list or choosing names from a verbal list. Aristotle is silent on the procedure and, for our purposes, it is rather inconsequential since in either case Kleisthenes holds the same political and communicative control. (See Fontenrose 1978:222.)
the reorganization itself. Again, we are lacking the direct context of the question. Nevertheless, Aristotle never indicates that the Pythia was involved in any decision surrounding Kleisthenes’ reorganization except the naming of the tribes. It is Kleisthenes alone who designs and implements this new democratizing social organization. The Pythia, on the other hand, is left with a comparatively superficial decision—the choice of ten heroes, any set of which alters in no appreciable way the proposed political system. Limited to such a topic, the Pythia has little recourse to refuse or hinder and only a limited ability to alter Kleisthenes’ plans.

Kleisthenes’ method of limitation, though effective for his purposes, is rare. Lot or list type oracles are seldom attested in the textual record of Delphi and archaeological evidence for their existence is scarce.\textsuperscript{114} Most often, control over responses was accomplished through skillful methods of questioning, which rendered the consultant’s inquiry difficult for the Pythia to reject. For example, Xenophon writes that he had consulted Delphi before setting upon a journey, asking to which gods he must sacrifice in order to meet with good fortune and return home safely. Delphi duly advised Xenophon on this matter, recommending a set of gods to whom he should sacrifice (though these remain unnamed in the passage). Although Socrates later reminds Xenophon that he should have asked whether it was proper go on the journey at all, the Pythia, as Xenophon, takes the matter of the journey as an established fact.\textsuperscript{115} The question itself contains very little content concerning the journey Xenophon was intending and

\textsuperscript{114} Fontenrose gives two analogous examples—H21 and L162—both involving the blind choice of one answer by the Pythia. See J. Fontenrose 1978:222.

\textsuperscript{115} Xenophon, \textit{Anabasis} 3.1.5-7.
successfully couches the consequential matter of the journey in a question about sacrifice to which almost any answer the Pythia could give would be favorable. The oracular response assumes, by reflecting upon the question itself, the authorization of Xenophon’s journey through his sacrifice to the gods, even though the Pythia had absolutely no knowledge of the trip nor the reasons for it. The Pythia cannot be seen to shape or alter Xenophon’s journey, only to assure Xenophon’s divine protection.

Another question form, “is it better to do X?”, is quite frequently used by consultants in Delphic consultations. Like the question about Socrates earlier, it immediately frames the inquiry in terms of the consultant’s perspective, rhetorically marking X as the valued category, unlikely to be dismissed. Xenophon provides a detailed example of this question form in his discussion of Lycurgus’ proposed changes to the Spartan legal system. Xenophon writes:

πολλῶν δὲ καὶ ἄλλων ὄντων μηχανημάτων καλῶν τῷ Λυκουργῳ εἰς τὸ πείθεον τοῖς νόμοις ἐθέλειν τοὺς πολίτας, ἐν τοῖς καλλίστοις καὶ τούτῳ μοι δοκεῖ εἶναι, ὅτι οὐ πρῶτον ἀπέδωκε τῷ πλήθει τοὺς νόμους πρὶν ἔλθων σὺν τοῖς κρατίστοις εἰς Δελφοὺς ἐπήρετο τὸν θεὸν εἰ λῷον καὶ ἄμεινον εἰς τῇ Σπάρτῃ πειθομένη οἰς αὐτὸς ἔθηκε νόμοις. ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀνείλε τῷ παντὶ ἄμεινον εἶναι, τότε ἀπέδωκεν, οὐ μόνον ἄνομον ἄλλα καὶ ἄνοσίου θεὶς τὸ πυθοχρήστως νόμοις μὴ πείθεοδαι.

And of all other excellent and subtle contrivances of Lycurgus to encourage citizens to obey the laws, it seems to me that this one is among the best: before he gave the laws to the multitude he went with aristocrats to Delphi and he asked the god if it was not better and more desirable that Sparta should obey the laws which he himself established. And when [the god] answered that it would be better in every way, then he gave [the laws to the people], [stating that] it is not only lawless, but profane, not to obey the laws the Pythian god had established.116

116 Xenophon, Lac. Rep. 8.5.
Lycurgus, through his consultation at Delphi, endows the laws that he established (οἱς αὐτὸς ἐθήκε νόμοις) with the divine sanction and authority of Apollo, placing the god, instead of himself, as author of the laws (θεῖς τὸ πυθοχρήστοις νόμοις). Lycurgus utilizes the claim of divine authorship, rendered possible through the positive response of the oracle, to coerce the Spartans’ acceptance of and obedience to the laws. An act against the new legal order is now an act against the god. Lycurgus, moreover, renders the Delphic session a semi-public affair, bringing other aristocrats to the Delphic consultation and, thus, alleviating one source of local contestation. Who would, indeed, act contrary to the orders of the god? Note that again, the Pythia’s acceptance of the consultant proposal in no way shaped the actual laws concerning which Lycurgus came to the shrine, only their potential authority and acceptance in the local sphere.

In all the above examples, excepting the consultation about Socrates, Delphi is asked to authorize an intended action or change, be it personal or political in scope. Nowhere does Delphi shape the form of the primary political action nor does it challenge the consultant’s essential plan. Delphic consultations ultimately provided clients with the power to utilize responses with the authorial and legitimizing weight of the god Apollo but a creative genesis in the intellect of the consultant himself. Oracles, in this way, were a powerful means of removing apparent human agency from the decision-making process while divinely authorizing what had, in large part, already been decided on by consultant communities or individuals.\(^{117}\) In account after account, it is clear that Delphi trafficked

authority, not political advice, and could do very little to alter a consultant’s intended course of action.\textsuperscript{118}

Delphic bribery cases throw suspicion upon some of our most lucid accounts of Delphi’s influence over local political action. In one such case, Herodotus relates that the younger Kleisthenes, an Alkmæonid, was thought to have bribed the Pythia to command any Spartan consulting Delphi on matters both public and private to “liberate Athens.” Although the performance of an oracle unrelated to the question of inquiry is an occasional motif in colonization narratives and tragedy, its use in historical consultations is rare.\textsuperscript{119} The regularity of the responses given to the Spartans here belies Delphic manipulation not evidenced in oracular practice. The oracle must be rendered several individual times to different consultants before the Spartans were induced to act out of piety, seeing no alternative interpretation of this all too clear oracle. Ultimately, the corrupt oracle provided the political leverage needed by Kleisthenes and his supporters to exact a response from Sparta, a community that would otherwise have been unwilling to act against their allies, the ruling Pisistratidae.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{118} R. Parker 2000:76-77.

\textsuperscript{119} See J. Fontenrose 1978:38.

\textsuperscript{120} Herodotus 5.63, 5.66. The case is similar to the bribery case described in Thucydides 5.16 (briefly recounted in Plutarch De Pythiae Oraculis 403b). Pleistoanax, then exiled in Lycaeaum, bribed the Pythia, with the aid of Aristocles, to command all Spartan delegations to bring back the seed of the demigod son of Zeus (Pleistoanax himself – Spartan kings claimed their decent from Heracles) or else face dire consequences (plough with a ploughshare of silver). Pleistoanax was ultimately returned to Sparta. The cause of Pleistoanax’s original exile was, ironically, a charge of bribery during a military campaign in Attica.
Whereas Kleisthenes’ bribery of the Pythia was utilized to influence the foreign policy of an outside polis concerning Athenian rule, bribery could, similarly, affect political actions concerning contested matters of domestic politics. The story of the Spartan kings Demaratus and Kleomenes, related in Herodotus, illustrates this point well.\textsuperscript{121} A strong enmity had arisen between the two kings, brought to the fore by disagreements over a war in Aegina. Kleomenes, undertaking to depose his fellow king Demaratus, convinced another Spartan, Leotychidas, to bring a suit contesting Demaratus’ paternity, and, thus, Demaratus’ hereditary claim to the Spartan throne. After a lengthy and ultimately indecisive court battle, the matter was referred to the Pythia for arbitration. Meanwhile Kleomenes, having failed to obtain his goal within the judicial system, induced Korbon, an influential Delphian, to persuade the Pythia to prophesy in his favor. Kleomenes’ oracle was given to the Spartan delegation, Demaratus was deposed, and Leotychidas assumed the Spartan throne in his place. For some time, the oracle was accepted without question but eventually rumors spread about the Pythia’s corruption. When the ruse was discovered, only the Delphians themselves were punished—Korbon was exiled and the Pythia, Periallas, was deprived of her office. Demaratus was not returned to the Spartan throne, nor were Kleomenes or Leotychidas themselves removed from office.

Ultimately, Kleomenes’ immunity was more for politically pragmatic reasons rather than any binding fidelity to the “oracular message,” now proven corrupt. Herodotus relates that Kleomenes feared public backlash from the scandal and, leaving

\textsuperscript{121} The full narrative through Kleomenes’ death is recounted in Herodotus 6.61-84.
Sparta, secured the loyalty of the Arcadians. This alliance placed sufficient military pressure upon the Spartans so that Kleomenes was allowed to return with his full title and command unchanged.\textsuperscript{122} Unfortunately, since we lack truly comparable cases, the nature of the potential public backlash against Kleomenes remains a mystery. We only surmise, from Kleomenes' anxiety, that the threat was valid and pressing.\textsuperscript{123} Herodotus, moreover, gives no indication that Leotychidas was ever implicated publicly nor that he suffered public disfavor as a result of the bribery scandal. Leotychidas retained his kingship until he was exiled for an unrelated charge of bribery while on military campaign in Thessaly.\textsuperscript{124}

While Kleomenes' bribery of the Pythia is similar to Kleisthenes' insofar as both men corrupted the oracle in order to directly influence public opinion, acceptance of these oracles within the local sphere played out quite differently. Kleomenes' oracle was immediately accepted because it fit into the Spartan's own expectations. The question—was Demaratus the son of the previous king, Ariston?—assumes either the answer "yes" or "no". The "no" answer that Kleomenes planted, therefore, did not

\textsuperscript{122} Herodotus 6.74-75.

\textsuperscript{123} Herodotus eventually relates that Kleomenes died from blood loss incurred during a fit of insanity-inspired self-mutilation. Herodotus has several explanations for Kleomenes' insanity, his own favorite being divine retribution for corrupting the Pythia to speak against Demaratus (6.75, 6.84). The Argive and Athenian explanations implicate Kleomenes for impiety on other occasions, including the destruction of sacred groves (of Argos and Eleusis respectively) and, added to the Argive explanation, the killing of surrendered prisoners. The Spartans own explanation centers around Kleomenes' adoption of the Scythian habit of drinking undiluted wine (6.84), a truly barbarian custom.

\textsuperscript{124} Herodotus 6.72.
immediately arouse suspicion because it fit into the frame created by the Spartan consultants at the time of the Delphic inquiry. The oracle remained unquestioned, even by Demaratus, within its direct enactment. It was only when the rumors spread concerning the bribery of the Pythia, that the Spartans questioned the legitimacy of the oracle and reacted negatively toward Kleomenes.¹²⁵

The oracle to “liberate Athens” had no similar accepted consultant frame. The overthrow of the Pisistratidae had no general support from the Spartan population and it is likely that no Spartan consultant would have inquired about this essentially Athenian political matter. Kleisthenes’ oracle was eventually accepted because of its sheer repetition. The message is so direct and so frequently annunciacted that it could not be ignored or alternately interpreted, leaving the Spartans little recourse but to follow the dictates of the oracle, though reluctantly.

It should be noted, moreover, that bribes were messy affairs for the individuals involved. A charge of bribery directly challenged the objectivity and legitimacy of the shrine by replacing divine knowledge with the consultant’s desired response. If discovered, the corruption could have had dire consequences both for the shrine and for the individuals involved. Kleomenes scarcely averted public disgrace; Korbon and Periellas were strictly punished by Delphi. Moreover, if a consultant could not trust the divine source of the oracle, then there was little reason to consult the shrine, much less offer opulent dedications and sacrifices, the shrine’s main source of income. It is little

¹²⁵ Oddly, Demaratus only bothers to ask his mother about his paternity after he is insulted by his successor Leotychidas and not before either the trial or the consultation at Delphi (Herodotus 6.67-69).
wonder that when another Spartan, Lysander, attempted to bribe three major oracular shrines—Delphi, Dodona, and Libyan Ammon—he was rebuffed at each.\footnote{Plutarch \textit{Lysander} 25.3-4, Diodorus Siculus 14.13.1-8.}

Lysander’s intentions were nothing short of revolutionary. Angered by his treatment at the Spartan court of Agesilaus, Lysander sought to abolish the hereditary kingship system and establish, in its stead, a political system where rulers were chosen based upon merit.\footnote{Plutarch \textit{Lysander} 24.2-5.} An oracle obtained through bribery would have afforded Lysander the religious authority to forward his plan to the citizenry.\footnote{Plutarch \textit{Lysander} 25.1-4, Diodorus Siculus 14.13.3.} The temple of Ammon, however, was sufficiently outraged by the bribe that it sent temple officials to Sparta to inform the government of Lysander’s iniquities. Lysander, in the end, provided a sufficient defense of his actions to avoid punishment.\footnote{Diodorus Siculus 14.13.5-7.} Only after Lysander’s death was his plot to overthrow the government discovered.

It was quite rare for the actions of an individual or community to be directly and independently shaped by Delphi through an oracular response. If the consultant did not receive the expected or desired answer, the oracle could be interpreted, contested, or subverted to suit the needs of the enquirer. Take, for example, the case of Kleisthenes, tyrant of Sicyon, grandfather of the aforementioned Athenian Kleisthenes. Embroiled in a war against Argos, Kleisthenes sought to expel all things Argive from Sicyon. This included the rather reactionary measure of banning rhapsodic contests (the performance

\footnote{Plutarch \textit{Lysander} 25.3-4, Diodorus Siculus 14.13.1-8.}

\footnote{Plutarch \textit{Lysander} 24.2-5.}

\footnote{Plutarch \textit{Lysander} 25.1-4, Diodorus Siculus 14.13.3.}

\footnote{Diodorus Siculus 14.13.5-7.}
of which included Homeric material praising Argos\textsuperscript{130} and the intended removal of the shrine of the hero Adrastus, an Argive and prior Sicyon king. Upon bringing his latter intention before Delphi, Kleisthenes was flatly rejected by the Pythia who states that, 
"Αδραστόν μὲν εἶναι Σικυωνίων βασιλέα, ἐκεῖνον δὲ λευστῆρα (Adrastus is king of the Sicyons but that man [Kleisthenes] deserves to be stoned.)\textsuperscript{131} This rejection, however, did not ultimately deter the tyrant. Lacking Delphic authorization to remove the shrine of Adrastus altogether, Kleisthenes instead established a shrine to Adrastus’ rival, Melanippus, to which he diverted the sacrifices and festivals once performed at Adrastus’ shrine.\textsuperscript{132} The diversion of religious rites to the shrine of Melanippus effectively undermined the shrine of Adrastus, while still maintaining the literal dictate of the Delphic oracle which prohibited the shrine’s removal.\textsuperscript{133} Although Delphi was no accessory to the undermining of the shrine of Adrastus, it was ultimately powerless to prevent this end or to subvert Kleisthenes’ ultimate intention.

\textsuperscript{130} Although Kleisthenes’ actions seem extreme, one is reminded of the recent GOP neologisms—Freedom Fries and Freedom Toast—designed to expunge the French from menus in the House of Representatives cafeteria, a conservative reaction to France’s vehement resistance to U.S. foreign policy prior to the second Iraq War. The linguistic banishment of entire nations is not entirely uncommon in American political rhetoric and propaganda. World War I brought the renaming of sauerkraut (liberty cabbage), dachshunds (liberty dogs) and even German Measles (liberty measles).

\textsuperscript{131} Herodotus 5.67.

\textsuperscript{132} Presumably Kleisthenes established Melanippus’ shrine without seeking Delphic approval, though Herodotus is silent on the matter.

\textsuperscript{133} The full story is given in Herodotus 5.67-5.68 with comparisons to the younger Kleisthenes in 5.66 and 5.69 respectively.
The consultant’s power over the use and misuse of oracles is evidenced in a passage from Diodorus Siculus. I quote at length this passage because it captures, although in extreme form, the control that the consultant exercised over both the oracular session and the use of the oracular message in the public sphere.

Οὔτος γάρ κρατῶν τοῦ μαντείου προσέταττε τῇ Πυθίᾳ τὴν μαντείαν ἀπὸ τοῦ τρὶπόδου ποιεῖσθαι κατὰ τὰ πάτρια. ἀποκριθαμένης δ’ αὐτῇ ὅτι τοιαῦτα οὐκ ἔστι τὰ πάτρια διηπείλησατο καὶ συνηνάγακα τὴν ἀνάβασιν ποιεῖσθαι ἐπὶ τὸν τρίποδα. ἀποφθεγμένης δ’ αὐτῇς πρὸς τὴν ὑπεροχὴν τοῦ βιαζομένου ὅτι ἔξεστιν αὐτῷ πράττειν ὁ βουλεύει, ἀσμένους τὸ ἡθὲν ἐδέξατο καὶ τὸν προσέκοντα χρησὶν ἐγγραφὸν ποίησας καὶ προθεῖς εἰς τούμμανξ ἀπαίσι ἐποίης φανερὸν ὅτι ὁ θεὸς αὐτῷ διδὼν ἐξουσίαν πράττειν ὁ τι βουλεύει.

Gaining control of the oracle, that man [Philomelus] commanded the Pythia to prophesy upon the tripod after the traditional manner. But when she replied that this was not the traditional manner, he threatened her violently and forced her to mount the tripod. Speaking her opinion plainly, in reference to the superiority of the man overpowering her by force, she stated that it was in his power to do what he desired. He gladly accepted the utterance and declared that he had a proper oracular response. At once he had the oracle inscribed and set out in public and made it manifest to everyone that the god gave him the authority to do what he wanted.\(^{134}\)

Two points, in particular, stand out. First, Philomelus’ expectation of the shrine’s operation ultimately prevailed despite the Pythia’s own professional knowledge concerning the proper and traditional procedure of oracular performance. He expected her to prophesy from the tripod and, when she objected, she was violently forced to conform to Philomelus’ expectations of performance. Second, Philomelus controlled the very marking of the Pythia’s response as an oracle, though her utterance was clearly in response to his force rather than divine inspiration. This “oracular” message, conforming

\(^{134}\) Diodorus Siculus 16.27.1.
to Philomelus’ own desires, was then publicly displayed as a divine legitimization for his subsequent actions. Philomelus did come to Delphi seeking divine authority, not advice, and the acquisition of that divine authority was ultimately the “oracular” message he accepted and disseminated in the public sphere. While I would reject the notion that Philomelus’ consultation was normal, particularly considering his threats of violence, the narrative presents a construction of power that highlights the powerlessness of the Pythia and the Delphic shrine to challenge the dissemination and enactment of oracles, even ones so violently extracted and so radically misinterpreted.

Oracular interpretation is a powerful means of ensuring the enactment of the consultant’s wishes, despite the risk of possibly unfavorable oracles. As Park notes in his anthropological analysis of divinatory systems,

an inconvenient divination is often doubted and belittled; and it may be tried again elsewhere. In the end, it is not so much the choice of the divining instrument but that of the public, reflecting the alignment of interpersonal loyalties, which decides whose divination will prevail, and how far.\textsuperscript{135}

It is in the local, political sphere where the true acceptance, rejection, or reshaping of oracular messages occurs independently of Delphic influence. While there are certain limits to interpretation—Kleisthenes of Sicyon could not claim a favorable response; he could only ignore the spirit of the original oracular injunction—these limits ultimately provide a far wider horizon of control to consultants than to the oracular shrine. An oracle is not an independent political injunction to be passively accepted by consultants. If an oracle cannot be interpreted, reinterpreted, or misinterpreted to fit a consultant’s or a

\textsuperscript{135} G. K. Park 1963:198.
community’s needs, it will be rejected, either replaced with an alternate course of action independent of the oracle or contested until a more favorable oracular response is provided for interpretation. The formal contestation of an oracle is demonstrated vividly in Herodotus’ telling of the “wooden walls” oracle.\textsuperscript{136}

In this narrative, the Athenians sought a Delphic consultation concerning the imminent Persian invasion. The oracle, given by the Pythia Aristonike, told of great carnage that would befall Athens and suggested that mass exodus was the Athenians’ only recourse against Persian aggression. Upon hearing their plight, a prominent Delphian urged the delegation to return to the shrine as suppliants. The Athenians, following the man’s advice, vowed to remain in the temple, and even die there,\textsuperscript{137} until the god saw fit to provide them with a more favorable prophecy. The Pythia eventually capitulated to their requests and provided a second, less pessimistic oracle—the enigmatic command to seek protection behind walls of wood. It is this second, more favorable oracle which the Athenians inscribed (συγγραψάμενοι) and brought to their countrymen. Although enigmatic, the oracle suggests the possibility of salvation from the Persian onslaught.

When the consultants returned to Athens, a heated debate surrounded the meaning of the oracle. We are told by Herodotus that the Athenians forwarded many interpretations for the oracle, but are we only given the content of two most prominent interpretations. The elderly men believed that the “wooden wall” was the stockade

\textsuperscript{136} The full narrative is provided in Herodotus 7.138-144.

\textsuperscript{137} The death of suppliants within the god’s temple would be considered a grave act of pollution.
surrounding the Acropolis. The opposing argument maintained that the wooden wall referred to the Athenian navy and urged the mobilization and preparation of the fleet. The only troubling aspect of this second theory concerned the final two lines of the oracle:

ο θεί Σαλαμίς, ἀπολείς δὲ σὺ τέκνα γυναικῶν ἢ που σκιδαμένης Δημήτερος ἢ συνιόοσης.

Divine Salamis, you will kill women’s children either when Demeter scatters or gathers in.\(^\text{138}\)

The proponents of the naval interpretation could not make sense of these lines, assuming that this statement marked a naval loss for Athens at Salamis. Themistokles solved this confusion by asserting that if the oracle had meant an Athenian loss it would have referred to Salamis as “cruel” (σχέτλη) rather than “divine” (θεί). The oracle must be referring to the defeat of the Persian army.\(^\text{139}\)

Themistokles’ interpretation is ultimately accepted by the majority of Athenians, as Herodotus relates:

ταύτη Θεμιστοκλέος ἀποφαίνομένου Ἀθηναίοι ταύτα σφίσει ἐγνώσαν αἱρητῶτερα εἶναι μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ τῶν χρησιμολόγων, οἱ οὐκ ἔσων ναυμαχίην ἀρτέσθαι, τὸ δὲ σύμπαν ἐφθαὶ οὐδὲ χεῖρας ἀνταἰρεῖσθαι, ἀλλὰ ἐκλιπόντας χώρην τὴν Ἀττικὴν ἄλλην τινὰ οἰκίζειν.

\(^{138}\) Herodotus 7.142.2.

\(^{139}\) The idea of utilizing the naval fleet, recently augmented because of an impending war with Aegina, would have been a rational strategy backed by many before the oracle was sought. Themistokles himself, as Herodotus notes, convinced the Athenians to use a recent surplus of public funds from the silver mines to build up the Athenian fleet and would have had an intense political and ideological interest in using this fleet against the Persians.
After Themistokles made these things known, the Athenians judged his words more desirable than those of the chresmologoi (soothsayers) who did not allow the sea battle to be prepared, they said that all together they should not raise their hands against [the Persians] but that they should abandon the Attic land to live in some other place.  

Although the meaning of the oracle derived by the chresmologoi is more obviously indicated from within the oracles themselves, particularly the first, Themistokles’ viewpoint ultimately was accepted because it provided the Athenians with a means for actively fighting the Persians.

The decision ultimately agreed upon had to fit within the desires and the sensibilities of the community members who, for the most part, had no desire to abandon their land to the Persians and flee to the ends of the earth. Since mass emigration was not an acceptable strategy to a majority of the population, the oracle and its interpretation were challenged until another, more acceptable, course of action was presented.  

The Athenians did not give political control over to Delphi, the Pythia, or to their own seers, the chresmologoi, but instead used the oracle within their own political framework to create a solution that was agreeable and acceptable to the majority of the population and, because of its oracular status, was legitimated by the impartial force of the divine. The

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140 Herodotus 7.143.3.

141 This interpretation was not universal. A small contingent of temple stewards (ταμίας τού ἱροῦ) and paupers (πνεύτας) believed in this viewpoint so vehemently that they remained in Athens to defend the Acropolis behind a wooden stockade, even after Themistokles had swayed general public opinion. These men were slaughtered by the Persians (Herodotus 8.51-53).
logic of the interpretation is the same as that which governs the political sphere within the
Athenian polity.  

The application of this public debate model to wider oracular practice flattens the
full complexity of the political systems which utilize oracles in varied and unique
situations. Community interpretation of contested oracular responses makes sense for the
Athenians concerning the “wooden walls” oracle precisely because it fits into the modus
operandi of the political and social system and into the contentious nature of the matter
under debate. I emphasize this geographical specificity because there are serious reasons
to doubt Parker’s contention that interpretive arguments over oracles are an “essential
part of the institution’s working”. Attractive as the Wooden Walls narrative may be for
greater generalization on interpretive tropes, we must understand this story within its own
particular political and historical framework and not as a model for interpretations in
widely disparate Greek communities and political systems. For instance, the oracle given
to Kleisthenes of Athens authorizing the newly established tribal system required no
public debate within the same community because the oracle was clear and the matter
itself produced little criticism.

The limits of oracular content and interpretation are defined both within the
consultation at Delphi and within consultant communities, where the oracles were
eventually disseminated, interpreted, and enacted. Often overlooked, the play of oracles
within the local and inter-state political arenas is crucial to understanding the role of


oracles as religiously charged political messages since the use of oracles will differ along with differences in the local political systems responsible for oracular interpretation and enactment. The Delphic oracle’s use in a wide variety of political systems—democracies, tyrannies, kingships, duel kingships, empires—ultimately reflects the flexibility of oracular discourse and the role of local political assumptions and expectations on the understanding and usage of oracular messages.

The consultants to the shrine, not the Pythia or her priests, were responsible for the ultimate import and interpretation of the oracular message within the their local communities. Theories of independent Delphic political power err in setting the shrine apart from the rest of Greek society as something “which had its own independent motivations.” 144 Although our sources cite Delphic oracles as the source of monumentally important polis decisions on matters of colonization, warfare, treaties, and new legal codes and religious practices, Delphi was not the authoritative source of these policy decisions, nor were consultants to the shrine passive and uncritical recipients of oracular messages. Oracles that ran counter to consultant expectations and desires were largely contested, ignored, reinterpreted, or rejected. Moreover, an oracular shrine fronting a consistent political policy independent of polis political structures (a policy overt enough to be debated by scholars in the present day), would eventually be discovered and discredited, no matter how strong the belief in Apollo or how naïve and gullible the consultant. A mere belief in Apollo would account neither for the popularity of the shrine nor the consultant’s blind acceptance of its precepts, particularly if Delphi’s

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144 Price 1985:143.
policy ran counter to the political ambitions of the consultant himself. Ultimately, oracles did not constitute an independent system of knowledge and authority, but were actively integrated into the same systems of logic and rationality that account for Greek politics and religion at the polis level.

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CONCLUSION

THE ORACLE AUTHORS THE PYTHIA

Theories of Delphic political power, whether constructed around the Pythia or the priests and prophets of the shrine, ultimately prove inadequate for understanding the actions and motivations of both Delphic functionaries and consultants. These theories largely omit the motivations, expectations, and experiences of consultants and establish, in their place, a reductive type of approach which links the first instance of communication to the political power of the utterance itself. As I have demonstrated, the power of Delphic oracles is determined less by what is said at the time of consultation than by how the oracle is manipulated, interpreted, and enacted within local political contexts.

Yet the Pythia’s possessed communication is not simply a matter of historical fact, insofar as this can be ascertained. It connects with a complex interaction of gender ideology and political power that are native both to the ancient world and to modern theoretical approaches. Writing on the Pythia involves a process of cultural translation that, if done successfully, renders the practice of ancient oracular consultation explicable.
Yet as such, it is particularly prone to academic ventriloquism, a speaking through the Pythia to our own concerns.

It is no accident that the prominent readings of the Pythia’s possession state prior to the 1950’s focused on the image of a frenzied and incoherent priestess, rendered incapable of legitimate political or oracular speech. Nor is it merely incidental that, with the advance of feminist-influenced anthropological theories of spirit possession, a new image emerged of the Pythia that was clear, direct, and resistively powerful. Even in antiquity, narratives mentioning the Pythia were largely not about the Pythia, but were used to illustrate the character of a consultant or to augment a description of a larger historical event. Rarely was the Pythia anything more than a character in a literary genre—the oracular narrative—and, only then, in the writings of later authors such as Plutarch. In the end, it may be less the case that the Pythia authors the oracle but that oracular narratives, ancient and modern, author the Pythia as a character within the reader’s imagination.

While the reading of modern concerns into ancient civilizations is nothing particularly new, identification of this type of reading can have dramatic repercussions for how we view and understand the Pythia’s possessed communication and its wider relevance to systems of gendered expression and political power. Revolutionary dreams, counter-hegemonic discourses, and resistive actions are largely hidden in the unwritten subtext within our canonic texts. We are forced, through a lack of textual resources, to seek subaltern voices within the very public transcript, which excludes, criticizes, and silences these actors. In a double twist of fate and textual criticism, these “voices”, silenced once by their own culture, are made to speak by means of a complex modern
ventriloquism made possible by the voracious creative production of academic scholarship. Yet we do no service to such "voices", even of our own creation, when we obfuscate or alter the actual terms of dominant power and expression in ancient political systems. By reframing our understanding of political power surrounding the use of Delphic oracles, we come to a better understanding of the ways in which power is legitimated not by what is said in possession performance but through the interpretation, manipulation and enactment of these "words of the divine".
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