Introduction

«De tous les ministres du culte delphique, la Pythie fut le plus célèbre, et c'est pourquoi nous la connaissons si mal: les Grecs la connaissaient trop bien,» wrote Georges Roux. Judging from the sources, Georges Roux is correct: the Pythia was the most celebrated Delphic official. She appears by name in nearly every ancient recording of a Delphic oracle, in many vase paintings, and is the subject of one of Plutarch's essays on Delphi. We know so little about the Pythia, however, not because the Greeks knew so much, but because we have asked questions concerning her role at Delphi about which our sources have little to say. They make no mention of her social standing, how she was selected, the length and nature of her service: the very practical details about who this historical personage was. Therefore, the positivist question whether the Pythia issued Delphic oracles (a matter now generally conceded) and those about her tenure as Delphic prophetess and her status can be deferred or even replaced by an inquiry into the biographical tradition of the Pythia on which our sources are abundant. A biographical tradition of the Pythia can be constituted from the brief accounts of the Pythias and of the first prophetess at Delphi, the Delphic

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1 G. ROUX, Delphes: son oracle et ses dieux, Paris 1976, p. 64.
Sibyl. These notices provide insight, not into any one historical Pythia at Delphi, but rather into the imaginary construction of the perfect representative of Apollo’s divination.

The symbolic world expressed by the Pythia’s biography is the same as the one expressed by Delphic oracles. They are roughly six hundred oracles attributed to Delphi. Whether in prose or verse, in stone or on papyri, these oracles compose a coherent and rich tradition about the practice of Delphic divination. The main line of inquiry into the nature of these oracles, as into the Pythia, has been strictly positivist: which oracles are authentic, that is, accurate transcripts of what Delphi issued on the particular occasion to which the oracle is ascribed. Those oracles which appear too accurate or too ‘poetic’ by modern sensibilities are dismissed as inauthentic, later inventions that have nothing to do with the actual practice of divination. Again to quote Georges Roux, ‘Toujours exprimé en vers, l’oracle ‘litéraire’ prenait volontiers la forme d’une devinette ou d’une énigme qu’il n’avait presque jamais dans la réalité, mais qui enchantaît l’esprit des Grecs, friands de ces jeux subtils’.

The question of how these inauthentic or ‘poetic’ oracles pertained to the particular event with which they are associated, like the question of the Pythia’s identity and role, should be re-framed as an study of how these oracles represented Delphic divination. In other words, the generic conventions of Delphic oracles, if we allow that prophetic literature had its own set of characteristic gestures, are not arbitrary choices wholly divorced from the practice of Delphic divination. They are an outgrowth of that practice, even if they do not provide detailed his-

torical information about it. Moreover, it seems likely that these oracles survived and flourished, not because the Greek spirit was enchanted by such subtle enigmas, but because these oracles conveyed a world view which was meaningful to those who told and listened to these tales. This was a view of the nature of prophecy and of divine intervention in the human world, of the possibility of communication between these two realms and hence necessarily of the communicative value of language itself. This view is represented and open to exploration. The conventions of Delphic oracular tales and the Pythia’s biography, their repeated gestures, are the place where such a view can be found.

Not surprisingly, these narrative and biographical conventions find analogies in certain ritual conventions at Delphi, a place demarcated and defined by the religious and symbolic character of its various parts. Thus, many of the concepts which can be found in the Pythia’s biography and in oracular tales also occur in the stories told about particular places at Delphi. Again, these stories are valuable, not because they might provide a map of actual locations or even actual practices at Delphi, but because they provide a symbolic map of Delphic divination.

The following examination of Delphi, therefore, will focus on Delphic narratives, the biographical tradition of the Pythia and the Delphic Sibyl, and Delphic ritual conventions: three different though commensurate expressions of the meaning and significance of Delphic divination. If I nearly exclude positivist questions, it is because these questions have dominated scholarship on Delphi while those about the symbolic and religious meaning of Delphi have all but been ignored.

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4 See Parke - Worrall, o.c., and Fontenrose, o.c. Both collections of oracles are arranged according to the authors’ notions of authenticity, an issue which shapes not only these works but also studies of individual oracles, especially those pertaining to political events.

5 Roux, o.c., p. 160.

6 "Genres communicate indirectly with the society where they are operative through their institutionalization. This aspect of genre study is the one that most interests the ethnologist or the historian... Each epoch has its own systems of genres, which stands in some relation to the dominant ideology, and so on. Like any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong." T. Todorov, Genres in Discourse, trans. Catherine Porter, Cambridge 1990, p. 19. Originally published as Les genres du discours, Paris, 1978.

I. Narrative Conventions

The narrative conventions of Delphic oracles are the salient characteristics of the extant oracles attributed to Delphi. This oracular tradition was oral since the transmission of oracles, both at Delphi and outside Delphi, was through word of mouth. At Delphi, there is little evidence that writing was used for the submission of questions or for the recording of answers. The most detailed account of the oral transmission of oracles outside of Delphi is the tale of the famous "wooden wall" oracle that the Athenians received in 481. In this instance, the theopropoi orally delivered (performed) the oracle in the Athenian assembly where its meaning was debated by citizens and chresmologoi until Themistocles offered the most convincing interpretation. The story of this oracle, as Herodotus tells it, is not only an ac-

8 The evidence for the submission of questions in writing can be found in a scholar's note on Aristophanes (Aristoph. Plutus 39). This evidence is, in my opinion, too late to be significant for evaluating the use of writing at Delphi. As for the recording of answers in writing, our earliest source is Herodotus, who twice indicates that ambassadors at Delphi had oracles written down for them (1.48 and 7.142). While it may be tempting to take these two notices as indicative of common practice, it seems more likely that the ambassadors who traveled to Delphi on behalf of cities and rulers were charged with remembering exactly what the Pythia said (on which see Theognis 825-10), but this need not have determined that writing was always deployed. As Rosalind Thomas has demonstrated, writing was not understood as a fool-proof means of preserving information until the middle of the fourth century (R. Thomas, Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens, Cambridge University Press, 1995). Until then its use for recording official documents served to corroborate that a particular decision or law had been accepted, but not to preserve the exact details of that decision. Given that Delphi is prominent from roughly the seventh through the fifth centuries when writing was only sparingly deployed (on which, see W. Harris, Ancient Literacy, Harvard University Press, 1989), its use would have been minimal. Furthermore, even if writing may have been used at Delphi for recording oracle answers, such use does not detract from the abundant evidence that suggests that 1) Delphic oracles are mostly recorded in sources which date a generation or so after they have been issued from Delphi; 2) Delphic oracles were remembered over such stretches of time by those to whom the oracles pertained, because they were significant and 3) their verse form, when they were in verse, assisted in memorizing and placing them in collective memory.


count of how and why the Athenians adopted an offensive strategy against the Persians but also a foundation story for Athens' naval power and for Themistocles' rise to fame. The fundamentally oral nature of this tale, in addition to the oracle's oral transmission in the assembly, is made explicit in the oracle's last couplet which forecasts the naval engagement between the Greeks and Persians at Salamis. Thus, since this battle did not occur until one or two years after the oracle was delivered, it may be the case that the oracle was not written down after its performance, but was stored in collective memory and molded to fit the course of history, as oral traditions are wont to be. As Thucydides says, when he tells the tale of the 'plague' oracle, whose wording was disputed and then remembered so that it fit the present circumstances of the Athenians, "people make a memory of the things they undergo." Such is the case with all oracles, Delphic or otherwise, whose suspect accuracy has less to do with bribes, political swindling and literary fabrication than with the homeostatic nature of oral traditions.

The accuracy of oracles is especially apparent when oracles are embedded in narratives, because these narratives all have the same plot: there is a problem or crisis, an inquiry is made at Delphi, an oracle is reported, then interpreted, an action is taken, the oracle comes to fruition either to the benefit or to the detriment of the oracle-seeker. This streamlined plot owes its formation to the oral transmission of oracles. As oral tales are continually retold, they will be structured as economically as possible; extraneous details will be lost because they are difficult to remember and there is no point in remembering them. As a result of this "structuring", oral tales in any one tradition will acquire a uniformity of overall design which will consequently re-
reflect what is most important to those who tell these tales 14. Therefore, while the conventions of oracular tales, such as their plot, may make them appear fictionalized, these conventions are a consequence of oral transmission. Although historical details are modified or lost in the process of oral transmission, these conventions remain clear and pronounced. Moreover, the prominence of these conventions suggests their importance: they reveal how the tellers of these tales understood communion with the divine through divination 15. In the following, then, I will examine two conventional elements in Delphic narratives, the pronunciation of the oracle and its subsequent interpretation.

When describing the "imbrication of signification and generation" regarding proper names in early medieval grammar, Howard Bloch writes, «Names, as signs, bear prospectively the mark both of their meaning and their historical effects; understood through time, they fulfill the promise that they contain. Language constitutes, in this respect, a kind of genetic code in which the future in germ is inscribed but which remains indecipherable until its genesis has become historically realized» 16. The same could be said of Delphic oracles. Like names, they both mean and promise, and are indecipherable. In the case of oracles, their encoding of the «future in germ» is a mark of their divine origin. This genetic code does not merely allow oracles to be foreshadowing devices, a common description of their function. Rather, this genetic code offers the possibility of attaining a kind of immortality to those who can decipher it. The acquisition of knowledge about the future through prophecy is tantamount to the acquisition of divine knowledge more generally. Since a human understanding of the world is limited precisely because mortal life is constrained by time, to extend one's knowledge of events beyond the present into the future or past is to situate oneself as a god in relation to those events. As both reader and/or oracle-seeker interpret the oracle, they aspire, though perhaps not explicitly, to situate themselves in just such a fashion. To reconsider the unfolding of a story from a different perspective, that of an infallible narrator such as Apollo, is to free oneself from the vagaries of chance, if one is an oracle-seeker, or from the vagaries of narrative, if one is the reader of an oracular tale. It is in effect to become infallible, that is not human and perhaps divine 17.

Oracles, however, do not easily grant such a safe haven to either the oracle-seeker or reader. Because oracles are spoken with knowledge of past, present and future, a fact which their «genetic code» makes manifest, they have a «superabundance» of meaning 18. This superabundance of meaning is what makes oracles indecipherable. Oracles contain a multiplicity of interpretations (are the «wooden walls» the ships the Athenians have yet to build or the wooden palisade around the Acropolis in Athens?) and a multiplicity of plots (should the Athenians adopt a defensive posture by remaining behind the wooden palisade, or an offensive posture by building ships?). Since oracles offer several plots or readings, they compel interpretation. Moreover, the oracle-seeker and reader's attempt to interpret the oracle is the focus of oracular tales. Oracles suspend narration, and this temporary halt of events is filled by the interpretative gesture of the oracle-seeker. The Athenians, for example, cease to prepare for the Persian invasion and instead debate the meaning of the oracular phrase «wooden-walls» in the assembly. Oracular tales thematize the interpretative gestures of the oracle-seeker, those attempts to transcend the human condition and to manage the plenitude of divine speech.

An oracle's superabundance of meaning which demands interpretation resides in the tropes, most notably metaphor, that

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14 VANNINA, o.c., pp. 167-173.
17 It is only from such position that one can make sound judgments, as Solon’s advice to Croesus underscores. Solon tells Croesus that one can count a man blessed only after he dies. Only then does one have knowledge of the whole temporal span of a man’s life. Without such an encompassing perspective, one cannot know who is fortunate and who is not (Hdt. I, 32).
permeate oracular speech. Metaphors are the most frequently used device in oracles that can be labeled as ambiguous 19. It is not surprising that oracles employ metaphor. As Aristotle wrote, «Most smart sayings are derived from metaphor, and also from misleading the hearer beforehand. For it becomes evident to him that he has learned something when the conclusion turns out contrary to his expectation, and the mind seems to say, 'How true it is! but I missed it... And clever riddles are agreeable for the same reason; for something is learnt, and the expression is also metaphorical» 20. Aristotle's description of metaphor's effect on the hearer is comparable to an oracle's effect on the oracle-seeker when it comes to fruition in a way which the oracle-seeker had not foreseen. Moreover, metaphors are responsible for an oracle's ability to suspend narrative because of their «delaying of movement towards meaning or object». This delay, as Pat Parker has observed, is «what Valery seems to be suggesting in calling metaphors 'those stationary movements' ('ces mouvements stationnaires'), or 'deviations which enrich' ('les écarts qui enrichissent'), creators of a space of 'hésitation' distinct from the kind of language that disappears as soon as its 'aim' has been reached...» 21.

Metaphors not only make oracular language visible and thereby linguistically distinguish oracles from their surrounding narrative, they also mark oracles as divine language. In Homer, there are several references to the language of the gods that pro-

19 By my estimation, roughly 350 Delphic oracles (one quarter of all oracles) can be called ambiguous, that trait for which Delphi was most renowned, because they admit of two different readings. Most of these 350 oracles contain metaphors as Aristotle has defined it. While the scholarship on metaphor is voluminous and illuminating, Aristotle's classifications of the different types of metaphor is as useful as any. Aristotle's definition of metaphor subsumes what we would call metonymy and synecdoche because he defines metaphor as the substitution of species for species (metonymy and metaphor), genus for species, species for genus (synecdoche and metaphor). On Aristotle's classifications and their relationship to more recent interpretations of metaphor, see J. David Sams, The Anatomy of Metaphor, in The Social Use of Metaphor: Essays on the Anthropology of Rhetoric, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977, pp. 3-32 and P. Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, trans. R. Czerny, Toronto 1977, pp. 9-43. Originally published as La métaphore vive, Paris, 1975.


vide a context in which to place oracular language. In two instances, the gods have names for things that human beings do not, because human beings are unaware of the existence of these things. When Odysseus is instructed by Hermes to pick moly to protect himself from Circe's power, Homer reports that mortals had no name for this plant because they had neither come into contact with it (Od. X, 304). The gods have greater experience of the world than human beings and this accounts for the greater lexical range of their language. The same holds true for the Clashing Rocks (XII, 59-72). Among mortals, only those aided by the gods such as the crew of the Argos, have passed through the Clashing Rocks, and hence mortals have no name for them. The Clashing Rocks lie beyond the limit of human experience and knowledge, which is necessarily based on mortality, a limit which both divine knowledge and divine language transcend 22.

In four other instances of divine language in Homer, the gods use other names than mortals for the same thing. Mortals call the river near Troy Scamander, while the gods call it Xanthos. The name the gods have for the river is descriptive-xanthos means blond or fair and perhaps shining, thus indicating the shade or quality of the river's waters. In this instance, as in the other three, the gods' words for things not only denote the object in question, they also connote, that is, they say something about the nature of the object 23. Not surprisingly, the other major source of oracular ambiguity besides metaphor rests on similar etymological word play and homonyms. In such instances, it is unclear if a word denotes or connotes an object or place 24.

22 J. Strauss Clay, The Plantkai and Moly: Divine Naming and Knowing in Homer, in «Hermes» 100, 1972, pp. 127-30. See also her article, Demas and Aude: The Nature of Divine Transformation in Homer, in «Hermes» 102, 1974, pp. 129-36 where she argues that different words are used to describe divine and human voices.

23 Mortals call a hill «Batia», while the gods call it «sena polukarymoio Murines» indicating a heroine cult there (II. II, 813-14). Mortals call a giant «Aigias» son, while the gods call him «Briareos», thus describing his strength and finally mortals call a bird «kumindias», while the gods call it «chalkos», thus indicating its bronze or shimmering feathers (II. I, 403 and XIV, 291).

24 As an example of etymological word play, Damianetus is told to marry his daughter to an 'excellent Greek'. He marries her to a man named Aristomenes (PW 368). See also PW 133, 214, 225, 226, 227, 223, 368, 371, 387, 410, 412, 414, 416, 443, 457, 498, 515, 602. Several other oracles contain etymological word play that is peripheral to the
Divine language, as it is represented in Homer, has a superabundance of meaning. In Calvert Watkins words, mortals use unmarked or ordinary words, while the gods use a «higher and more restricted level of formal, poetic, or otherwise exotic languages».

Oracular tales thematize the difference between these two languages suggested in Homer. They consistently link the barrier between gods and men to the two different types of language each employs and more specifically to the way each of these languages refers to things. Human language may not be able to refer to the future because it is limited by the human knowledge of its speakers. However, human language is fairly direct—it easily refers to its object and thus makes itself nearly invisible. Divine language, on the other hand, speaks the truth and can refer to some future event, though, it is never clear exactly how such a poetic, metaphoric and exotic language does so: are the «wooden walls» the Athenian ships or the palisade around the Acropolis? When such a poetic language delays signification in this manner, it creates a space in narrative for interpretative activity, a space wherein human or ordinary rules of signification are confounded. This narrative space is carnivalesque in the way that Bakhtin describes. It is a ludic space of indeterminacy where no one mode of assigning meaning to words prevails. Several times, Herodotus calls oracles kibdelos (counterfeit), thus encapsulating this feature of oracles. Oracles do not play by the rules of ordinary signification. In fact, they tweak these rules by mimicking them and disavowing them, just as counterfeit coins or festivals of inversion do. In addition, the word «counterfeit» suggests that oracles have an interior that is quite different from their exterior. Just as the true substance of a resolution of the oracle (PW 6, 45, 65, 127, 388, 420, 443, 493, 517). As an example of homonyms, Eumolpides is told that he will die at sea (pelagos) which he diligently avoids. However, he dies in a grove named Pelagos (PW 258). See also PW 7, 18, 31, 49, 86, 131, 146, 161, 166, 168, 173, 190, 206, 230, 237, 258, 259, 267, 271, 359, 360, 436, 454, 511, 512, 525, 541.


22 R. Parker, o.c., p. 47.

23 Hdt. I, 66 and 75; V, 91.

The image of rubbing and wearing away metals on a touchstone to discover their true and hidden substance is commonly used to describe slaves who must be tortured so that they will reveal the truth. P. Dupuis, Torture and Truth, London, 1991, pp. 9-34.

24 See below n. 70.
of language from its surrounding narrative and thereby asserts
the difference between divine and mortal, it simultaneously
transgresses that boundary by enabling, more or less, communica-
tion between human beings and gods. This paradox mimics
the paradox of divination at Delphi. A god consents to reveal di-
vine knowledge through a female priest in the most ordinary of
ways, by speaking human language. Yet, he speaks in such a way
as to deny or confound human attempts at understanding. In
both instances, one can detect a tension between representing
Apollo, and thereby humanizing him, with preserving his divin-
ity or otherwise. Fourth, oracles are imagined to possess an in-
ternal space in which their real meaning is hidden. Similarly, en-
try into Apollo’s temple and the exact nature of his and the
Pythia’s exchange is occluded and free from public scrutiny. The
Pythia does not, like other chresmologoi or manteis, prophesy
outside Apollo’s temple in a public setting.

II. The Pythia’s Biography

These notions find their expression in the biographical tradi-
tions of the Pythia and the first Delphic Sibyl, both of which
will hereafter be referred to simply as the Pythia’s biographical
tradition. The Pythias at Delphi were the historical composers
of the oral tradition of Delphic oracles. Like Homer or Hesiod,
their authorship of the Delphic tradition is subject to the va-
garies of the oral tradition on which they place their name. That
is, it is not likely that any one oracle contains the ipsisimma verba
of a historical Pythia, just as it is not likely that the Iliad or
Odyssey contains the ipsisimma verba of Homer or any one
Homerian bard. However, the seemingly tenuous relationship
between oral composers and the written record of their work is
made less tenuous by the fact that oral composers «represent a
cumulative synthesis» of their poetic traditions 30. That is, oral
composers, or rather the stories about oral composers, whether
they appear in their work or in notices about them, will repre-
sent the salient features of their poetry. As Gregory Nagy
writes, «...oral poetry appropriates the poet, potentially trans-
forming even historical figures into generic ones who merely
represent the traditional functions of their poetry. To put it an-
other way: the poet, by virtue of being a transmitter of tradition,
can become absorbed by the tradition» 31. Such is the case with
the Pythia, whose biographical tradition, like that of
Archilochus or Homer, is a product of the Delphic tradition and
thus represents it 32.

Just as oracles are spoken from a divine or atemporal per-
spective and hence contain knowledge of past, present and fu-
ture, the Pythia in her person embodies the conflation of these
categories. Pausanias describes the first two women to chant or-
acles at Delphi. He claims that the first woman, Sibyl, is «as an-
cient as any» and the daughter of Zeus. The casual reference
to her great antiquity is echoed in his description of the second
woman to chant oracles at Delphi, whose claim to knowledge,
Pausanias implies, also rests in her antiquity. «Herophile was
younger than she was, but nevertheless she too was clearly born
before the Trojan war...» 33. The Trojan war marks Herophile’s
age as well as her knowledge and authority. To know about
Troy is to know about all of human history. When Diodorus, in
turn, identifies the first Sibyl at Delphi with Daphne the daugh-
ter of Teiresias from whom Homer borrowed verses, he in effect
places Homer as the authority about the past and puts the
Sibyl in his place 34. In descriptions of the Delphic Sibyl, then,
the Trojan war not only marks the time during which she lived
but also suggests her timeless quality and her authority, both of
which she bestows upon her descendants, the Pythias.

These two qualities are made explicit in a comment of
Plutarch’s, «But the Sibyl ‘with frenzied lips’, as Heraclitus has it,
it, ‘uttering words mirthless, unembellished, unperfumed, yet

30 G. Nagy, A Poet’s Vision of His City, in T.J. Figueira - G. Nagy (edd.), The-
gnosis of Hesiod: Poetry and the Polis, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, p. 33, and
see pp. 22-36 for a detailed example of this process.

31 G. Nagy, Greek Mythology and Poetics, Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 48
n. 40.
32 On Archilochus, see Nagy, Greek Mythology..., op.cit., pp. 49-51.
33 Paus. X, 12.
34 Diod. Sic. IV, 66.
reaches to a thousand years with her voice through the god. 35 Heracles’ saying implies that the Sibyl, by virtue of her service as Apollo’s mouthpiece, attains the status of a divine being because she lives a thousand years. By living indefinitely she, like a god, acquires divine knowledge of the past and the future as well as the present. Similarly, when Plutarch writes that the first Sibyl was reared on Helicon by Muses 36, he does not merely provide an etiology for the hexameter verse Delphic oracles employ. He suggests that the composers of these oracles have access to the past because the mother of the Muses is Mnemosyne (Memory) and the Muses themselves are able to sing about past, present and future. 37 Finally, the Pythias themselves are presented as atemporal, for as Diodorus reports, the Pythias although old wear the clothing of a parthenos. This custom, like Delphic oracles themselves, makes manifest the mixture of past, present, and future inherent in prophecy.

The Pythia’s biographical tradition not only encapsulates the temporal expansiveness of oracles, but also reflects the ambiguous nature of oracles themselves. Oracular ambiguity resides in metaphors. Of riddles comprised of metaphors, Aristotle writes, «For the essence of a riddle is to express true facts under impossible combinations» 38. The Pythia’s biography can be linked and compared to that of other unusual females, such as the Sirens and the Sphinx who are «impossible combinations», just like metaphors. A brief discussion of the metaphorical personalities of the Sirens and the Sphinx will elucidate the Pythias own metaphorical nature. While the Sphinx has a tripartite body, with the face of a woman, the torso of a bird and the lower portion of a lion, the Sirens have the face and torso of a woman and the lower half of a bird. Both female winged creatures represent metaphor in so far as all such hybrid creatures do. These hybrids embody the fundamental principle of metaphor—it joins two very different ideas and creates a new third entity which has attributes of both. 39

The Sirens and the Sphinx are particularly apt representatives of metaphor because, in addition to their physical features, both are associated with a kind of speech that is like or contains metaphor. In the case of the Sphinx, her riddle, «what is four-footed, two-footed, and three-footed?» consists of series of metaphors 40. Each item in the list is a metaphor (or perhaps synecdoche) for a human being at a particular life stage. Furthermore, the riddle presents all three stages as being simultaneous, just as the Sphinx’s own body is simultaneously human, bird, and beast. Oedipus solves the riddle by unpacking these metaphorical operations: he substitutes the literal terms for the metaphorical and sees that the four, two, and three feet stand for persons. Moreover, he restores time to the riddle, refusing its simultaneity, and sees that the riddle refers to persons at different stages in their lives. Oedipus’ interpretative skills are not unlike those required to solve ambiguous oracles.

The Sirens, on the other hand, do not speak in actual metaphors, but rather they appropriate the language of the Muses. First, the Sirens use an exotic language consisting of vocabulary and phrases which appear nowhere else in the Odyssey 41. Second, they are able to identify Odysseus immediately because, like the Muses, they are omniscient, knowing all things that have happened. 42 If the Muses are known

35 Plut. Mor. 397B.
36 Plut. Mor. 398C.
37 Hes. Theog. 29-32.
39 David Sahr, o.c. (n. 23 above). Most scholars working on metaphor now adhere to the interaction view of metaphor, first articulated by Max Black. In this view, the metaphorical term does not simply replace or substitute for the literal term as Aristotle would have it, but rather the literal and metaphorical terms interact or bleed into one another so that the net effect is that each term is colored or affected by its setting, and thereby a new and third term is created. M. Black, Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy, Cornell University Press, 1962.
40 Apollod. III. 53. Aristotle was the first to propose that metaphors comprised riddles (see Arist. Rhet. III. 2, 12 and 10, 6). Since Aristotle the folklore genre of riddles and their relationship to metaphors has been expounded by, e.g., Nigel F. Barley, Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle, in «Semiotica» 10, 1974, pp. 143-75.
41 For a survey of the Sirens’ language with its hapax and marked vocabulary, see P. Pucci, The Song of the Sirens, in «Arethusa» 12, 1979, pp. 121-132.
42 On the similarity between the Sirens and the Muses, see Pucci, o.c., pp. 126-127.
for their knowledge and their exotic and poetic expression which is akin to metaphor 43, so too are the Sirens.

The language of the Sirens and the Sphinx is not only filled with metaphor and exotic, restricted vocabulary, it is also oracular because it contains knowledge of the future and the past. The Sphinx’s riddle is a prediction about Oedipus. Its emphasis on feet links it to Oedipus and his forefathers, Laius and Labdacus. Moreover, it conflates three different generations, just as Oedipus will do when he marries his mother 44. Similarly, the Sirens claim they are knowledgeable, and they promise to their listeners knowledge of more things (eidos pleionia) 45. Furthermore, just as oracles suspend the course of event in the narratives in which they appear, the Siren’s song and the Sphinx literally suspend the progress of their listeners by killing them. While the pleasure of the Sirens’ song destroys its listeners, obliterating their desire for anything other than their songs, the Sphinx literally eats those who cannot answer her riddle. Passivity in the face the Sirens and Sphinx’s song is deadly; in the case of the Sphinx, death and interpretative impasse are equated.

The Pythia’s affinity with both the Sirens and the Sphinx is made clear in a fragment from one of Pindar’s paean. In describing the second temple at Delphi, Pindar describes the pedimental golden Keleidones who stand guard there 46. While it not possible to garner much information about these creatures from his description, one fact is discernible—he mentions their singing which is called a kind of warbling. Thus, the Keleidones appear to be some kind of a bird, like the Sphinx and Sirens. Both Pausanias and Athenaeus mention Pindar’s notice of the Keleidones and fill out the details of their career at Delphi. Athenaeus compares the Keleidones to the Sirens and writes that whoever heard

their song lingered indefinitely and eventually expired there 47. Here, then, an explicit link is made between the Pythia and these other mythological female creatures, who permanently delay or kill their listeners with their unusually potent voice 48. This association underscores the anomaly that the Pythia, as a female with a powerful voice, presents in Greek thought 49. It is as though a woman who speaks persuasively and exists outside of the control of those whom she advises could only be imagined as the combination of impossible parts like the Sphinx and the Sirens, or the Keleidones. According to Richard Caldwell, the Sphinx represents the phallic mother because her lower half is non-human and hence phallic 50. If the phallus is associated not with the male organ but with the social power it confers, a power specifically rooted in the freedom and ability to speak in public, then the Sphinx, the Sirens, the Keleidones, and the Pythia are indeed phallic. An impossible combination of male and female, then, the Pythia is symbolically imagined as a hybrid like her kindred sisters the Sirens and the Sphinx. The residence of the Keleidones at Delphi, those alter-egos of the Pythia, links her with the most prominent trope of her ambiguous oracles, metaphor.

The Pythia is a hybrid of another sort—she is by all accounts half human and half divine, just like Delphic oracles. While the

43 Aristotle repeatedly links metaphor to exotic or foreign vocabulary, see for example Ars Rhétorica III 2, 6 and Poetics 1458a 22-23.
45 Od. XII, 188 and 191.
46 Pindar Paean 8b. 7-11 (B. Snell, Carmina Pindari Cum Fragmenta, Teubner, 1953).
47 Athen. VII, 26, 290E; Paus. X, 5, 9; also links the Keleidones to the Sirens as does Philostratus Vit. Apollon. VI, 11.
48 See Sourvinou-Inwood, The Myth of the First Temples at Delphi, o.c., (n. 9 above). Sourvinou-Inwood calls the Keleidones «mythological pre-figurations of the human female prophetess who operated in the historical temple of Apollo at Delphi». While Sourvinou-Inwood sees the connection between the Pythia and the Keleidones, she does not attempt to explain their physical appearance in terms of their song or examine the similar nature of the songs of the Sirens, Sphinx and Pythia. She emphasizes that all of these females are understood as «dangerous females» who sing.
49 «Aristotle, citing Sophocles, is categorical: ‘Silence is a woman’s glory (kosmos).’ In an anthropology that accords all privilege to articulate, rational language, this is nothing but pure misogyny. For Aristotle a human being is human not only because he can indicate pleasure and pain with his voice but also because he is capable of discoursing on justice and injustice. An anthropos is superior to the animals because he alone can use intelligent and effective speech in the place of physical weapons. In the female, however, there is an inversion of values: for virtue takes the specific form of silence»; SISI, o.c., p. 55.
tropic and exotic vocabulary, as well as the use of verse, mark oracles as divine, oracles nonetheless retain their humanness because their medium is that most human invention-language. Oracles are hybrid-part divine and part human. So too is the Delphic Sibyl. Pausanias records a saying of Herophile, the second woman to chant oracles at Delphi, in which she explains her suitability to the task of prophesying: «I am by birth half mortal, half divine; an immortal nymph was my mother, my father an eater of corn...» When introducing Herophile's saying, Pausanias also records various traditions detailing the nature of the Delphic Sibyl's relationship to Apollo. While it is generally agreed that the Pythia's ritual relationship to Apollo is imagined as that of wife to husband or concubine to master, the Sibyl's relationship to Apollo is variously represented in her biographical tradition. She is described as Apollo's daughter, sister, and wife. This diversity of possibilities attests to the fact that this tradition does not attempt to explain the ritual at Delphi. It functions to mark the Sibyl as both divine and mortal like her prophetesses.

The Pythia's biographical tradition does not clarify who the historical Pythias were or what they did at Delphi. Rather, as a calque on the tradition of Delphic oracles, it articulates the salient features of those oracles, or, as Nagy would describe this process, the consummate poet of the Delphic tradition, the Delphic Sibyl or the Pythia, is absorbed by the tradition and «may be considered an idealized creation of the poetry in which [s]he has an integral part». The Delphic obsession with the possibility that the past, present, and future can be apprehended simultaneously is visually manifest in Diodorus' account of the Pythias who, although old, dress as young girls. The compelling language of oracles, especially their use of tropes, is no better represented than in the figure of the Kledones, those seductive warblers who, like the Sirens and the Sphinx, have hybrid bodies. Finally, the status of oracles as divine pronouncements cast in human form is represented by the Delphic Sibyl's genealogy which makes her the offspring of one divine parent.

III. Ritual Conventions at Delphi

Many of the ideas articulated in Delphic narratives and in the Pythia's biography are also articulated in the symbolic landscape at Delphi. The interest in time and access to the future and past that prophecy and the Pythia or Delphic Sibyl can grant one is expressed at Delphi in the shrine of the Muses which is placed near a stream. On the one hand, it is not surprising to find the Muses at Delphi, a shrine to Apollo who is sometimes called Musagetes and whose priestess issues his prophetic utterances in verse. However, Plutarch records a tradition about this spring near the Muses' shrine which suggests that the Muses and this spring have a greater significance at Delphi. Plutarch writes that the spring near the Muses' shrine was once identified as the river Styx. What does the river Styx have to do with prophecy and time? The answer to this question begins at another oracular shrine, Trophonius' shrine at Lebadeia. At Lebadeia, the procedure for receiving prophetic information is both complex and frightening. The oracle-seeker must first go through purification rites as priests read the entrails of the victim that the oracle-seeker has supplied. If Trophonius is deemed to be favorably disposed towards the oracle-seeker, he is led to two springs, Letha (Forgetfulness) and Mnemosyne

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51 She is sometimes described as the daughter of Zeus by Lamiata, the daughter of Poseidon: Paus. X. 12. Plutarch also makes her the grand-daughter of Poseidon through Lamiata: Plutarch 390C. See also Suda S 355. On the identification of Lamiata, see H.W. Parke, Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity, ed. B.C. McGing, London 1988, p. 49 n. 35.

52 Paus. X. 12.

53 K. Latte, The Coming of the Pythia, in «Harvard Theological Review» 33, 1940, pp. 9-19 who first examined Near-East parallels as well as Greek evidence and, more recently, Sissa who has looked at Greek notions about anatomy (above n. 2) understand the Pythia's union with Apollo as a sexual one.

54 She is Apollo's sister in Clement of Alexandria, Strom. I, 21,984 and Parke, p. 56, and Apollo's daughter in Suda 335A and perhaps PW 154.

55 Nagy, Greek Mytology—, p. 52 (n. 4 above).

56 Plut. Mor. 402C.

57 In the biographical tradition, the Delphic Sibyl is said to be reared by the Muses and to have come from Helicon, thereby reflecting the poetic nature of oracles. Plut. Mor. 398C.

58 «Eudoxus, therefore, was wrong in believing those who declared that this is called the water of Styx»: Mor. 402C.
(Memory) before he is permitted to consult Trophonius. The oracle-seeker drinks first from Lethe in order to forget everything he has recently been thinking and second from Mnemosyne in order to remember everything he will soon see. He then proceeds to the site of consultation and descends feet-first into an artificially constructed chasm which, Pausanias records, is in the shape of a bread oven. During this descent, the oracle-seeker learns the future, sometimes by sight, sometimes by hearing. After he re-emerges from the same chasm, feet-first, he is brought to the chair of Mnemosyne by the priests and reports all that he has seen or heard. Afterwards, the oracle-seeker, who is paralyzed with terror and unconscious from this ordeal, returns to his normal state.

The springs of Lethe and Mnemosyne at Lebadeia are of critical importance for the divinatory rite. The oracle-seeker must drink from Lethe, and in effect lose consciousness and memory in order to descend into the chasm and enter the underworld, the land of the dead. The transient world of the living is thus associated with Lethe, while Mnemosyne becomes associated with the opposite of death, that is, with immortality because «he who retains his memory in Hades transcends the mortal condition».

Mnemosyne initiates the oracle-seeker, giving him access to a knowledge he could not otherwise have, a knowledge rooted in an apprehension of past and future and found in an other-worldly place. In this sense, Mnemosyne at Lebadeia has a similar function as that which she has in the realm of poetry, where as the mother of the Muses, she grants the poet access to things that were, are, and will be. At Lebadeia, then, both the past and the future become assimilated as «not present» and located in the Underworld.

The connection between the underworld and its knowledge with prophecy is further clarified when Lebadeia is placed in an Indo-European context. The geography of Lebadeia is consistent with Indo-European funerary geography, where souls going to the Underworld must cross a river whose waters wash away their memories. Their memories, however, are not destroyed, according to Bruce Lincoln, «but are carried by the river’s water to a spring, where they bubble up and are drunk by certain highly favored individuals, who become inspired and infused with super-natural wisdom as a result of the drink».

Allowing for variations in detail, Trophonius’ oracle at Lebadeia fits into this general pattern; Lethe is equivalent to the river which causes forgetfulness and Mnemosyne to that spring that gives knowledge and inspires. The consultation at Lebadeia mimics a descent to the Underworld and deploys such funerary geography to very practical ends—learning about the future in the here and now. Moreover, the oracle-seeker undergoes an initiation: there is a symbolic death as he enters the underworld, a symbolic birth as he passes through a dark tunnel and re-emerges feet-first (perhaps the puzzling detail «feet-first» distinguishes this birth from the first birth), and an acquisition of knowledge as he enters a new and different understanding of his world.

At Delphi, the shrine of the Muses near a spring sometimes identified as Styx, the river of the Underworld, presents similar funerary geography. There is some evidence that there are two springs near the shrine of the Muses, one directly near their shrine and another nearby at the shrine of Ge (Earth) with whom they are associated. If there were indeed two springs near each other and one was associated with the Muses, and hence Mnemosyne their mother, and another was associated with the river Styx, then Delphi, perhaps in an older incarnation before Apollo’s arrival, may have been quite like Lebadeia as

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Pauly, IX, 39, 5-12.


Vernant, o.c., p. 81.

Vernant, o.c., p. 82.

Lincoln, Waters of Memory, Waters of Forgetfulness, in Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 57. In addition to several texts from a variety of Indo-European cultures, Lincoln examines two depictions of Greek funerary geography: Plato’s Republic 621 and an Orphic funerary tablet found in Petelia.

On the springs at Delphi, see M. Delcourt, L’Oracle de Delphes, Payot, 1955, pp. 43 and 201; J. Pouilloux - G. Roux, Enigmes à Delphes, Bocard, 1963, pp. 79-101; P. Ariand, La Manticque Apolloniennne à Delphes, Bocard, 1950, pp. 135-39 and 208-14. Plutarch reports that the Muses as guardians of the prophetic art were worshipped near the spring and shrine of Ge (Earth).
well as other depictions of the underworld. Even without the existence of the second spring, Delphi retains its similarity to these other locations in so far as it links the underworld, Mnemosyne and prophecy in one location. Furthermore, the elusive chasm, which inspiring emanations were imagined to arise and over which the Pythia sat, may have represented an opening to the underworld. Its association with prophetic vapors may allude to the notion that knowledge of the future comes from the Underworld which can be accessed or received through such openings.

The presence of Mnemosyne and the Underworld in the prophetic geography at Delphi links oracular knowledge about the future with the past and an otherworldly place. Mnemosyne’s presence at Delphi reinforces the notion that it is only from an immortal perspective which embraces a spectrum of time that one can have future knowledge, as the biographies of the Delphic Sibyl make clear. The knowledge that the oracle-seeker and/or reader of oracular tales seeks is possible only under the auspices of Mnemosyne, who can grant the oracle-seeker, like the poet, access to all time. Mnemosyne at Delphi makes evident the simultaneity of past, present and future at Delphi, just as oracles do in narrative. Similarly, the Underworld, where Mnemosyne stands guard, is akin to the narrative space that oracles create. In Delphic narratives, the appearance of an oracle suspends action, creating almost a backward motion. In such a space, the progress of the narrative stops, and reader and oracle-seeker alike must enter into different contract with their surroundings. The presence of the Underworld, then, emphasizes Delphi’s already other-worldly dimensions, removing it further in space and time from its geographical and historical surroundings.

While the symbolic map of Delphi expresses ideas about time and place similar to those found in Delphic narratives and in the Pythia’s biography, certain ritual conventions at Delphi also point to ideas found therein. In particular, the ritual of consulting Apollo makes manifest the hybrid quality of divine speech. This nearly paradoxical phenomena is realized in the imagined interaction between the Pythia and Apollo. The Pythia’s union with Apollo is a sexual one. It is a ritualized repetition of the joining of divine and human. Every oracle is the product of this sexual union between a mortal woman and Apollo a god. Consequently, like the offspring of all such unions, all oracles are ritually created to be part divine and part human. Born through the mouth of Pythia in a displacement upwards, the oracle enters the light of day, and grows, like a child, until it reaches its goal, that is, until the event it portends occurs. The Pythia in her station at Delphi is, as Sissa has shown, less a virgin than a dedicated and properly exclusive mate of Apollo.

In fact, it is the virginal and «Artemis-like aloofness» of Cassandra that renders her prophecies insufficient. Cassandra’s prophecies, like those of the Pythia’s, mirror her and reflect her relationship with Apollo. Cassandra’s prophecies are marked by a sterility. They, because they are not believed, are unamenable to interpretation, and hence they do not generate plots and multiple readings as the Pythia’s prophecies do. Monuments of frustration and futility, they epitomize Cassandra’s futile resistance to Apollo. Like orphans, they enter whatever narrative they appear in and are discarded as worthless. Yet they are not without their power. They too will mature and reach their promised end. However, upon utterance, their divine aspect is occluded in so far as no believes them. They appear not as hybrids, that is as divine communications wrapped in human speech, but as all too human misapprehensions. Cassandra, in her biography, is fig-

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65 While it is impossible to re-construct with any degree of certainty what rites were practiced before Apollo arrived at Delphi and before the Delphi’s activity is recorded in writing, it is significant that after Apollo’s ascension (literary) at Delphi, there remain traces of a chasm from which prophetic knowledge was thought to emanate, prophetic waters loosely associated with Mnemosyne, and markers of the Underworld (Styx and Chasm). All of these items suggest that at Delphi, as at Lebadeia, the future and prophecy was intimately linked to the past and the world of the dead. On such chthonic oracles and their existence at Delphi, see B.C. Druick’s, Reflections on the Origins of the Oracular Apollo, in «Bulletin of the Institute for Classical Studies» 25, 1978, pp. 4-5 and AMANDRY, o.c., Chapter XVIII.

66 The elusive chasm at Delphi may have been artificially constructed and hence not recoverable in archaeological investigations, on which, see DELCOURT, L’Oracle de Delphes, o.c.

67 LATTE, o.c. (n. 54 above) and SISA, o.c. (n. 2 above).

68 SISA, o.c., p. 39.
ured as the wholly human, and perhaps duplicitous daughter of Priam, while the Pythia, in her biographical tradition, has divine origins. Similarly, Cassandra’s relationship with Apollo is figured as a violent rape, while the Pythia’s ritualized relationship with Apollo at Delphi is figured as a discrete sexual matter with the Pythia as a willing wife and mother of their prophetic offspring.

Finally, the interiority of oracular speech, its inside and outside which is made manifest in Herodotus’ description of it as counterfeit (kibdelos) finds its corollary in the representation of Apollo’s temple in Delphi. At Delphi, Apollo’s temple is a house where legitimate linguistic reproduction can take place. More than any other temple in antiquity, Apollo’s temple is referred to as a house (domos, oikos) 69. There, the Pythia is the consummate «matron» or wife. But more than this, the hearth in Apollo’s temple converts the Pythia into Hestia Tamia, a keeper and treasurer of Apollo’s goods, who can store and then exchange their oracles for gifts 70. In this regard, she is like Hestia at the oracle site in Pherae who exchanges oracles for coins in the market place 71. As a woman associated with the interiority of her hearth, the Pythia as Hestia, is not accessible to the general public, just as the true meaning of Apollo’s oracular utterances is available only to a privileged few. Here too the ritual conventions at Delphi are commensurate with the conventions of Delphic narratives.

IV. Conclusion

The Pythia’s first recorded utterance betrays the correlation between all three of these conventions. When Croesus tests the oracular shrines in Greece and Asia Minor at the opening of Herodotus’ Histories, only the Pythia can surmise what he is doing. Herodotus’ recording of this oracular tale not only establishes Delphi as the source of accurate or true prophecy in the Greek world, but also establishes the Pythia as an alternate narrator in his Histories 72. In this oracle, one of the few that can be considered autobiographical, the Pythia discusses her talents. Her self-description indicates both the nature and the method of her knowledge. She claims to know the number of sands on the shore and the measure of the ocean. Her ability to measure and count is typical of prophets and prophetesses. It epitomizes her skill in apprehending measures, like that of time, that other mortals cannot. The Pythia also claims to be able to hear the mute and to understand the deaf. Her knowledge collapses human categories of understanding and organization, for the distinctions between methods of human apprehension or articulation are irrelevant to the Pythia; she knows the mute and the deaf.

The Pythia’s description of Croesus’ activities makes good her claim to such transcendent knowledge. «There enters my perception the odor of a hard-shelled tortoise roasting with lamb’s flesh in bronze, where there is bronze laid underneath and bronze on top». Her artful use of anaphora in describing Croesus’ bronze pot highlights that his attempts to conceal his cooking is futile. The Pythia can apprehend his ingredients despite their enclosure in bronze. So too is his attempt to imagine the unimaginable futile. The Pythia can imagine his stew of tortoises and lamb, which turns out to be quite mundane and all too human compared with her ability to count the sands. Moreover, her oracle accurately though cryptically describes and explains an exotic practice by a non-Greek, an accomplishment to which Herodotus himself aspires. Here, the oracle supplies a type of knowledge which transcends that of Herodotus’ own wisdom, just as the plots it generates will counterpoint Herodotus’ own stories. The tale of Croesus’ test, then, establishes Delphi as the preeminent oracular shrine, as it simultaneously portrays the Pythia herself as embodying a transcendent and eternal knowl-

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69 In Euripides’ Ion and Aeschylus’ Eumenides, both of which take place in Delphi, Apollo’s temple is most often referred to as a ‘domos’. See, for example, Aesch. Eum. 35, 205, 207 and Eur. Ion 34, 223, 226, 228, 249, 370, 310, 314, 533, 1275.
70 On Hestia Tamia in general and the oracle shrine at Pherae, see J.P. VERNANT, Hestia-Hermès: The Religious Expression of Space and Movement in Ancient Greece in Myth and Thought..., o.c. (n. 61 above). On the role of the wife as the keeper of household goods, see Xenophon, Oeconomicus.
71 Paus. VII, 36.
72 Hdt. I, 47.
edge, and the oracle as introducing that knowledge in Herodotus' narrative and thereby interrupting his own and others' all too human plots.

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