

INTERPRETATIVE STRATEGIES FOR DELPHIC ORACLES AND KLEDONS:

Prophecy Falsification and Individualism

Lisa Maurizio

1. Delphic Accuracy and Oral Traditions in Herodotus

One feature of the Delphic tradition of oracles has proved a stumbling block to understanding Delphic divination: nearly all the oracles attributed to Delphi are accurate; few are disconfirmed. Various hypotheses have been offered to explain the accuracy of Delphic oracles. Some emphasize the social elements of divination. For example, Delphic priests fabricated stories of Delphic accuracy or issued ambiguous oracles that could appear accurate in many circumstances; clients asked only for approval of their preconceived plans or indicated their desires during a divinatory session and then implemented the rigged advice they received; clients fabricated oracles to authorize their activities. Literary factors contributing to Delphic accuracy include the activities of writers such as Plutarch or Herodotus who shaped oracular tales to suit their own narrative goals or the gradual blending of folklore genres of proverbs and riddles into the Delphic tradition. Scholars who subscribe to one or more of these hypotheses view Delphi as a successful institution that offered workable, and even desirable, solutions to clients' questions and that was represented by a largely fictionalized, even sensationalized, tradition.¹ Consequently, they often divide the corpus of oracles into authentic oracles (those ascertained to have issued from a divinatory session at Delphi because they are historically plausible as recorded) and inauthentic oracles (those deemed fictional because they defy historical plausibility and did not issue from Delphi), while giving scant attention to the religious and aesthetic elements that

¹ PARKE/WORMELL 1956 emphasize the role of Delphic personnel in issuing ambiguous oracles and crafting stories at the shrine. FONTENROSE 1978 has argued that the interplay between folklore motifs and the Delphic tradition as well as the oral circulation of oracles renders most inauthentic. These different emphases lead both editors of the collections to very different conclusions about which oracles are authentic and which are not. Most recently, Hugh BOWDEN 2005 has reviewed the corpus of oracles, and like Fontenrose, argued for the authenticity of the written epigraphical oracles from the fourth century. I have argued for a reexamination of the question of authenticity in light of the oral transmission of oracles (MAURIZIO 1997). See also PARKER 1985, FLOWER 2008 and GRAF 2009 who accept verse and prose oracles are authentic.

inform Delphic divination.²

This study increases the number of hypotheses available to explain Delphic accuracy without wholly rejecting rational and crafty (both deceitful and artful) priests, clients, writers and politicians etc. who believed in divination only enough to use it to their own ends.³ It attributes the accuracy of recorded Delphic oracles to the actions and beliefs of individuals, whether they are oracle seekers or informants, ie. those who tell oracular tales, through a study of two interrelated responses to divine language: prophecy falsification and kledonomancy.⁴ Both are predicated on a belief in the veracity of oracular language or chance utterances whose origin can be located in the divine. This essay explores the religious and aesthetic aspects of these phenomena, and Delphic oracles, in Herodotus' *Histories* by tracing them back to the oral traditions in which they appear. In so doing, it provides a way to locate Delphic accuracy in individual responses to divine language, which in turn will allow a consideration of the question of individualism in archaic Greek divinatory practices.

Herodotus' *Histories* provides one important chronological slice of the Delphic tradition. Not only do its oracular tales have a chronological end-point, namely the middle of the fifth century, but also they comprise a written collection of oracles most proximate to their oral circulation during the prior two centuries when Delphi was frequently consulted.⁵ Herodotus' tales capture the oral transmission of oracles better than later sources do and offer the best evidence for studying the practices of prophecy falsification and kledonomancy with Delphic divination. Yet, limiting this study to Herodotean oracular tales risks mistaking his stylistic and narrative inflection of them with the Delphic tradition itself. In his

- 2 Scholars who are not concerned to address Delphic accuracy tend to forego recourse to theories of manipulation, political or otherwise. VERNANT 1991 offered the first study that explored the religious, intellectual and social dimensions of Greek and Delphi divination, on which see JOHNSTON 2005, 10. BARKER 2006 and KINDT 2008 offer programmatic studies of Delphic divination that focus on its cultural, religious, and intellectual aspects. See also KIRCHBERG 1965 and KURKE 2009.
- 3 Herodotus' reports on the bribery of shrine personnel, interpretative errors about oracles, the misapplication of oracles etc. are frequently collected and noted (perhaps a testament to his rationality and scepticism?). Most recently, see ASHERI 2007, 65 and LATEINER 2007, 813.
- 4 PERADOTTO 1969, 2 offers a succinct definition of kledonomancy. A kledon is "an apparently casual utterance heard by a man when he is deeply preoccupied with some plan, project, or hope, and understood by him as an omen of the outcome of his preoccupation."
- 5 FONTENROSE 1978 delineates in some detail the oral circulation of oracles for generations before their recording in writing. See also MAURIZIO 1997 and FLOWER 2008 who offers a useful modification of Maurizio; he argues that the hexameter oracles had more fixity than their surrounding narrative frames. Similarly, MURRAY 2001 (1987), 31. n. 6 argues that Fontenrose inverts "the relationship fixed text (oracle) and flexible reality: it is the event which is 'quasi-historical', not the oracle." Notably, ASHERI 2007, 63 and 65 n. 14 posits that many Delphic oracles came from "written literary sources" that Herodotus quotes verbatim. GIANGIULIO 2001 offers a cogent review of written and oral collections of Delphic oracles and argues that Delphic oracles were preserved by both means before entering the pages of Herodotus' history books.

seminal study of Herodotus' reliance on oral traditions, Oswyn Murray applied insights from the anthropological literature on oral traditions, most notably those of Jan Vansina, to address more precisely how to evaluate Herodotus' oral sources and distinguish them from his narrative voice.⁶ He argues that, "the most obvious and fundamental characteristic of oral tradition is the importance of the group that preserves it...group memory is more cohesive than the general recollections of the past."⁷ Because oral traditions remembered by groups are formed by their interests,⁸ they are distinguished from folk traditions that tend to reflect the "society as a whole"⁹ and to spontaneously generate variants. While group memory ensures that an account will be preserved so long as remains it meaningful to the group, "it is also likely to be more limited and more liable to bias, for it reflects the interests of the group rather than those of the society as a whole."¹⁰ The groups whose traditions Herodotus collected include those of aristocratic families, non-aristocratic families, groups or associations within cities, particular classes such as merchants, and cities.¹¹

Extending Murray's ideas to *akoe* statements—accounts that Herodotus explicitly attributes to collective oral sources—Nino Luraghi argues that these ought not to be treated as source references,¹² for Herodotus did not speak to collectivities of Spartans, Phoenicians etc. Rather *akoe* statements must be understood as "references to the group that believes it knows—in the sense of holding as true—a certain tale or piece of information."¹³ *Akoe* statements point to the "social surface of knowledge," for they indicate to whom the tale and its contents are true and meaningful. Yet, *akoe* statements do not represent official traditions of groups, remembered and promoted by officials (*logioi*), but rather emphasize, in a way that needed no clarification in an oral society, that knowledge is collective and is the shared possession of the group to whom it is attributed.¹⁴

6 Oswyn MURRAY's essay is reprinted in Nino Luraghi's recent collection of essays where it serves as a touchstone for the essays that follow on oral traditions in Herodotus. It is referred to here as MURRAY 2001 1987. LURAGHI 2001, 1–15 and MURRAY 2001, 314–325 offer overviews of the "oral revolution" to which MURRAY's original essay responded and its impact on Herodotean studies and frame. See also LANG 1984 a and b.

7 MURRAY 2001 (1987), 25.

8 MURRAY 2001 (1987), 28 has chosen the word "deformation" to express this process and avoid the words bias or prejudice. Yet "deformation" seems as biased and problematic as the other alternatives, while formation seems neutral.

9 The distinction between folklore and oral tradition ought not to be pressed, since folklore is a type of oral tradition. MAYOR 2000 provides an overview of folklore studies in classical scholarship and bibliography.

10 MURRAY 2001(1987), 27.

11 MURRAY 2001(1987), 28–31.

12 LURAGHI 2001, 143–144 emphatically states, "we have to de-emphasize the concrete meaning of these source references."

13 LURAGHI 2001, 147.

14 See also THOMAS 2001, 205 n. 8 for bibliography on Herodotus' oral sources, and her argument (210) that "the groups telling and transmitting such [oral] traditions seem to have been various and unorganized, mostly uncentralized and almost always 'unofficial'."

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The Delphic tradition, Murray argues, differs in two key ways from the oral traditions that circulated on the mainland. Mainland traditions “can be regarded as the origin of our Western style of history with its rationalism. Its emphasis on action in politics and war and its obsession with decision making and human causation.”¹⁵ For this reason, these traditions remain elusive. They comport so well with traditional western history, they are difficult to de-naturalize and see as a particular type of explanatory narrative, rooted in a time and place in Greece. The Delphic tradition is, on the other hand, moralizing and theological, even if it sometimes exhibits “‘political’ deformation” and promotes the shrine. Additionally, the Delphic tradition, unlike the mainland traditions, shows “heavy use of folk-tale motifs, recurrent patterns, and deformation for moral ends” and, in this respect, is more similar to “prose storytelling in Ionia.”¹⁶ While Murray does not explicitly claim that Delphic tales preserved at the shrine would differ in orientation and style from those attributed to mainland groups, his work implies as much. Roughly half of Delphic tales in the *Histories* are attributed to informants and are *akoe* statements.¹⁷ Some are attributed to a client, whether an individual or a group, who traveled to Delphi or sent an embassy to receive an oracle; to a group with a vested interest in the oracular tale, such as the Bacchiades; or to Delphi. Thus, Delphic tales were orally circulated by a variety of groups and thus exhibit characteristics of both mainland and Delphic oral traditions.¹⁸ In any case, the discernible orientation of a tradition and the perspective of its transmitters are factors that do not vouch for nor argue against the veracity of its tales.¹⁹

The perspective inherent in group traditions is a constitutive factor not only in their remembrance, as Murray points out, or their “social surface” as Luraghi argues, but also in their form. In his analysis of identity-constitutive reasoning, Albert Musschenga draws a parallel between narratives in practical argumentation and historical narratives in historical explanation. He argues that individuals must be able to explain their actions to others in ways that will appear “rational,

15 MURRAY 2001 (1987), 31.

16 MURRAY 2001, 318 revisits the debate about the existence of an Ionian prose tradition.

17 Of the 58 oracles that PARKE/WORMELL attribute to Delphi, those that have explicit attributions and thus are *akoe* statements include PW 6, 7, and 8 are attributed to Sosicles of Corinth; PW 35 and 36 to King Leotychides; PW 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42 to the Cyrenaeans and Theraeans; PW 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58 to Delphi; PW 63 to Cnidians; PW 72 to Krotoniates and Sybarites; PW 79 to Athenians; PW 86 and 87 to Kleomenes of Sparta; PW 91 to the Parians; PW 92 to the Argives; PW 96 and 97 to Delphi; PW 116 to Metapontines; PW 157 to Spartans.

18 In the Delphic tradition, Spartan tales seem to contain information about interpretative techniques that are often lacking in other tales. On Spartan religion and traditions see MALKIN 1994 and PARKER 1989.

19 MURRAY 2001 (1987), 35 warns that an “investigation should not start from the historical reliability of the traditions available to Herodotus, let alone from the truth or falsehood of single statements or episodes: these are secondary questions, which can only be established after the types of tradition have been established.”

responsible, and reliable.”²⁰ Since simple statements of motives rarely explain or justify actions in ways that are comprehensible to listeners, motives “must be given in the form of small autobiography. By that I mean that I must put my motive under the rules of story telling.”²¹ Explanations of behaviors must be placed in a well-plotted story for their inherent truth and significance to be made evident. Similarly, an event is historically meaningful, if it is placed in a narrative with a plot; otherwise it will appear random and without significance or simply one item in a list or chronicle.

Herodotus’ *akoe* statements and stories that are surmised to be from group traditions are not chronicles, nor are they catalogues, a favored oral genre; they are narratives of events that justify actions or lands taken, heroes discovered or recovered, or constitutions or laws adopted. For the most part, they are social charters whose narrative patterning makes sense of their content, and are rightfully judged biased, or less pejoratively, one could say, they always convey the perspective of their tellers. They do so in ways that must appear rational, reliable and responsible to the listeners to whom they are necessarily directed. Group traditions and *akoe* statements, then, will always be stories as a consequence of their social function and oral circulation prior to their inclusion in Herodotus.²²

Delphic oracular tales tend to share a certain pronounced pattern: announcement, action, fulfilment. We cannot imagine Herodotus supplying oracles without interpretations, such as we find in Eusebius’ collection of Oenomaus’ oracles, though it is possible that local collections, whether written or oral, were lists of oracles a group received.²³ We can imagine collections that explain interpretations of Delphic oracles, such as Artemidorus’ collection on dreams, but interestingly there are no references to a handbook on how to interpret Delphic oracles. Instead, Delphic tales of accurate oracles are often well-plotted, albeit brief, tragedies, where *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* occur simultaneously as the client realizes what the oracle means at the moment that the oracle’s predicted event unfolds.²⁴ Sometimes the audience understands the oracle when the client does not. In this case, the tale produces dramatic irony, and emphasizes that men, even when informed by the gods, cannot make sense of themselves and their futures, just as the *Oedipus Tyrannos* (a tragedy much indebted to the Delphic tradition) does.

Many oracular tales in the Croesus saga contain this streamlined structure. Indeed, Herodotus most likely learned about Croesus’ oracles from Delphi itself;²⁵

20 MUSSCHENGA 2004, 57.

21 MUSSCHENGA 2004, 63 quoting RICOEUR.

22 This point is obvious but bears repeating. No one argues that Herodotus converted chronicles, catalogues or genealogies into narrative tales. The only question is how he transformed oral narratives in order to integrate them into his *Histories*.

23 On references to written collections of oracles, see FONTENROSE 1978, 145–156.

24 FONTENROSE’S survey of oracular tales with folkloric elements 1983 provides many examples of oracular tales with this pattern.

25 FLOWER 1991 makes a convincing case that this tale was well preserved at Delphi because it

its highly aestheticized composition is not Herodotus' alone. When, for example, Croesus' mute son cries out to protect Croesus as he is attacked and about to be killed, and thus enacts and clarifies the oracle's advice not to desire to hear the boy's voice (*anagnorisis*), at the moment Croesus goes from being king to slave (*peripeteia*). In most instances, as in this one, the audience understands Croesus' oracles while he does not and thus the dramatic irony of the Croesus saga builds across several Delphic consultations and culminates in his demand that Apollo himself explain his oracles. Croesus' demand mirrors his initial test of Greek prophetic shrines; both are *contra mores*. Both suggest that this saga operates on two levels; it establishes Delphi, and especially the Pythia, as a reliable narrator in Herodotus' work.²⁶ The Croesus saga also embodies the aesthetic patterning and moralizing that Murray describes as typical of the Delphic tradition and East Greek tales in the service of reflecting on how human desires (whether for kingdoms or knowledge) inhibit the human quest for wisdom.²⁷ But not all of Herodotus' tales are as aestheticized as the ones in Croesus' saga and not all of them come from Delphi. Some oracular tales that are attributed to groups and thus are *akoe* statements have not been distilled to a crisp brief tragedy with moral import. Several of these describe prophecy falsification and thus draw a link between the accuracy of the Delphic tradition and individual, not institutional, practices and beliefs.

2. Prophecy Disconfirmation in Mainland Tales in Herodotus

In his now canonical book *When Prophecy Fails*, Leon Festinger argued that when a prophecy is disconfirmed, it creates cognitive dissonance in believers and prompts further actions or modifications of beliefs.²⁸ Such cognitive dissonance is particularly acute, if believers have taken irrevocable actions to prepare for a specific, and hence verifiable, prophecy that was disconfirmed. In such instances, Festinger argued, believers' proselytizing would increase because the successful persuasion of others would bolster the viability and success of the group and thus reduce cognitive dissonance. Subsequent studies of disconfirmed prophecies among millennial groups suggest that the responses to a disconfirmed prophecy are more variable. Sometimes, an increase in proselytizing has been documented before a predicted end time, only to drop off after disconfirmation.²⁹ What bears

was attached to Croesus' numerous dedications there. See also MURRAY 2001 (1987), 34.

26 KIRCHBERG 1965, HARTOG 1999 and KINDT 2006 emphasize the historiographical purposes to which Herodotus puts the Delphic oracles in the Croesus saga.

27 Yet PW 50 (Hdt. 1.19) may be an exception. Herodotus reports an oracle about King Alyattes of Lydia that he claims to have heard from Delphi. The oracle has a clear moral message, but the tale lacks a resolution and discernible patterning to mark it as Delphic or Ionic.

28 FESTINGER 1956.

29 The Jehovah's Witnesses, a millennial group that originated in 1870 in Pennsylvania, has survived and prospered despite six disconfirmed predictions in 1878, 1881, 1914, 1918, 1925

noting is that prophecy disconfirmation prompts actions, often in the form of reinterpretation among believers, and is a matter of perspective. For believers, a disconfirmed prophecy that is reinterpreted is not disconfirmed at all. “The denial of failure is not just another option, but the common mode of adaptation of millennial groups following the failure of a prophecy.”³⁰

What happens when a verifiable Delphic oracle has been disconfirmed and prosyletization is not an option to relieve cognitive dissonance? And who decides whether a prophecy has been disconfirmed by events—an inveterate oracle-recorder such as Herodotus, the oral informants he sometimes mentions, the oracle-seekers themselves, or the scholars writing about Herodotus? One tale about oracle disconfirmation raises all of these questions. When Doreius, the younger brother of Kleomenes, leaves Sparta, he receives advice from Antichares of Eleon to take Eryx, the region in western Sicily that belonged to Heracles and thus to Doreius, his descendant.³¹ Doreius consults with Delphi and is told “to take it.” Upon his arrival in Italy, the Krotoniates ask Doreius to help them take Sybaris, a request he promptly meets. In the course of battle, the Krotoniates with Doreius’ assistance conquer Sybaris. Herodotus reports that the Krotoniates deny that Doreius helped them, and they use as evidence that no land was given to him or his descendants. The Sybarites point to land dedicated to Athena by Doreius in support of their claim that he did indeed help defeat Sybaris. They also claim that he died before taking and possessing Eryx because he acted against the oracle’s advice (*para ta memanteumena*) when he engaged in battle as an ally of the Krotoniates. Here then we can say that the oracle was disconfirmed. Doreius did not take it (Eryx in Sicily).

On the one hand, the *akoe* statements of the Krotoniates and Sybarites pertain to their local setting and interests. The Krotoniates’ denial of Doreius’ assistance in effect cuts off any oracular claim the Spartans might have to the land they had helped to conquer. The Spartans could argue that since the oracle prophesied they would take it, and they did indeed take Sybaris, it is now rightfully theirs. The Sybarites’ explanation of Doreius’ over-stepping the oracle mirrors the over-

and 1975. Each of these dates was initially predicted to be a time of Armageddon, when the righteous would find themselves in a restored Edenic paradise on earth where death was no more. When each prediction of Armageddon failed to occur, each predicted year was nonetheless marked as a significant moment, and each reshaped the direction of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ institutional and spiritual endeavors. After the most recent disconfirmed prophecy in 1975, proselytizing decreased and many members were expelled from the religious community when they questioned why Armageddon had not occurred (Schmalz 2000, 239). Hence, over time, prophecy disconfirmation may increase proselytizing as Festinger hypothesized, or it may winnow down the number of believers, and/or prompt transformations among believers about their spiritual state or their spiritual tasks (SINGELENBERG 2000).

30 MELTON 2000, 149.

31 Herodotus 5.43–45. This is oracle 72 in PARKE/WORMELL 1956. Hereafter oracles will be cited from their collection and indicated by “PW.” On Doreius, see MALKIN 1994, 203–218; 204 n. 41 provides bibliography to which HORNBLLOWER 2004 and 2007 may be added.

stepping of which they are so often accused.³² Their story about the Spartan assistance of the Krotoniates also preserves the reputation of the Sybarite military; they would have fended off the Krotoniates, were it not for the Spartans. The self-interests and political motivations are not difficult to spot in the *akoe* statements of the Sybarites and Krotoniates. On the other hand, their self-interests do not fully explain the motives or methods behind the disconfirmation of Doreius' oracle.

The Sybarites' assertion that Doreius took too much denies the oracle's disconfirmation. Similarly, Simon Hornblower writes, "The colony in Sicily also failed, although this one was endorsed by Delphi to the extent that he [Doreius] was promised he would 'take the place he was sent against' (but if he took Sybaris then he had in a sense 'used up' this oracle prematurely and the oracle was not actually falsified)."³³ Hornblower emphasizes that the object the Pythia promised Doreius was not specified. Like the oracle that tells Croesus he will destroy a great kingdom if he goes to war and does not specify which great kingdom, Doreius' oracle predicts he will take the land, without specifying which land. Because the oracle is not specific, it may be considered ambiguous. But this ambiguity is only recognized after the oracle has been disconfirmed. Thus, imputing ambiguity to Delphi is a form of falsification on the part of individuals and groups invested in the outcome of an oracle. It is a strategy to reduce their cognitive dissonance. Curiously, the Sybaritic denial of this oracle's disconfirmation depends on disobedience on Doreius' part, not the inherent ambiguity of the oracular word, suggesting further that recognizing or claiming oracular ambiguity was one of several possible ways to address disconfirmation.

Prophecy falsification may be found in other Delphic tales and offers an alternative to the range of scholarly hypotheses that explain accurate oracles as *post eventum* forgeries. Tales of prophecy disconfirmation offer glimpses of the social and religious texture of divinatory practices that contribute the accuracy of the Delphic tradition. When, on the advice of a Delphic oracle, the Phocaeans go to Alalia, a colony they had established twenty years earlier in Corsica, whose alternate name is Cynus, they are unable to live peacefully with their neighbors and depart after five years. They then establish Elea in Rhegium where they

32 The Sybarites make several attempts to resettle near Sybaris after being defeated by the Krotoniates. On their second recolonization attempt, Diodorus Siculus (12.10.5) reports that the Sybarites receive an oracle that tells them "it is necessary to establish a city in that place where they will live, drinking water within measure and eating bread without measure". This is found in Thurii where there is a spring with a bronze fountain called medimnos. The water will be measured because the fountain's name medimnos is a measure for grain. Zenobius (5.19) says that this line "drinking water without measure and eating bread in measure" "comes from an oracle which the God gave to the Sybarites. For being very hubristic and unmeasured they were destroyed by the Krotoniates." Zenobius then sets the oracle in a prior colonization effort of the Sybarites, on which see PW 131 with bibliography. The Sybarites, their oracles, and their interpretations have a shared motif: measures, boundaries and stepping over them. See also RUTTER 1970.

33 HORNBLOWER 2004, 110.

worship the hero Cynrus on the advice of a Poseidonian man who re-interprets (falsifies) the name “Cynrus” to mean the hero, not the place.³⁴ Possessing a Delphic oracle that said he would take Argos, the Spartan Kleomenes begins his military campaign against Argos. Upon learning that a grove he destroyed was dedicated to the hero Argos, Kleomenes judges his original interpretation of his oracle disconfirmed and abandons his plan to attack on Argos.³⁵ In his speech to his fellow Spartans, Kleomenes claims to have consulted omens in the temple of Athena to verify his interpretation of the Delphic oracle.³⁶

Jean-Pierre Vernant writes that the “model” of divination found in oral traditions from the archaic age is neither an “artificial creation” but is instead “a ‘theoretical’ representation of divinatory activity that the polis seems to have made very early on.”³⁷ In this view, parsing which parts of these tales are historically accurate, i.e. describe events that happened, and determining which oracles came from Delphi, comes at the price of ignoring the religious dimensions of how dialogues with gods were conducted. Kleomenes consults a Delphic oracle to authorize, not determine, his decision not to invade Argos. His (and others’) interpretations are consistent with a belief that divine language is always accurate and true, even as his interpretations shift to reflect his self-interests, and first lead him towards and then away from Argos. Kleomenes’ interpretations highlight the authority of clients to interpret and reinterpret Delphic oracles as events unfold. More startlingly, the Argives and Athenians simply reject, without interpretative high-jinks, oracles they do not want to follow.³⁸ The Athenians beg the Pythia for an alternative oracle when they do not like the one she issued.³⁹ In group traditions from the mainland, oracular tales convey the process of interpretation; although an oracle is a divine prediction, the client is not released from making a complex decision. Additionally, oracular interpretation makes human events as well as divine speech the objects of interpretation.⁴⁰ That the divine voice could be

34 PW 49/Hdt. 1.165–166.

35 PW 86/Hdt. 6.76.1

36 FONTENROSE’S comments on this oracle are typical of Delphic scholarship “The story is improbable, since, though the Spartans were superstitious, we may doubt that Kleomenes would have abandoned his campaign after winning a battle so decisively.” In a footnote, FONTENROSE adds, “I should make it clear that that I believe the story of the oracles and its fulfillment to be pure legend; but this does not mean that I consider Kleomenes’ attack on Argos to be unhistorical. Here as elsewhere legend has entered into historical narrative.... That in reality Kleomenes may not have wanted to take Argos is irrelevant to the oracle story, in which he intended to take it.” (FONTENROSE 1978, 69 and n.19) As FONTENROSE washes out the legendary aspects of this tale, he eliminates the possibility that Kleomenes’ disconfirmation of the oracle is paradigmatic of how oracle-seekers might interpret and act on oracles that captures a crisis in the midst of a military campaign when a decision is taken that includes divine consultation but is not dictated by it—on which see KIRCHBERG 1965 with IMMERWAHR 1967.

37 VERNANT 1991, 314.

38 PW 92 = Hdt. 7.148.2 and PW 82 = 5.89.2.

39 PW 94 = 7.140.

40 VERNANT 1991, 312 – 314 on the wooden wall oracle (PW 95 = 7.142).

interpreted variously and to suit its client's needs does not imply accurate oracles are *post eventum* forgeries. Oracles were falsified, that is interpreted and reinterpreted, because their constituent elements were not elaborate patterns that required mastery of a system, but words that could be easily remembered. Clients and tale-tellers attempted to suture a true divine word to their circumstances in order to render their world comprehensible.

3. The Divinatory Word and the Limits on Interpretation

The Sybarites, Kleomenes, the Phocaeans, and Hornblower, whose reasoning approximates Apollo's advice that Croesus ought to have asked which great empire would be destroyed if he went to war, deploy slightly different forms of disconfirmation: but all adhere to the same premise, namely that once spoken, an oracle is true. This belief or premise did not entail a slavish obedience to the divine word, but instead encouraged its opposite: namely interpretation. This belief and its implications for a creative response to oracular utterances is made apparent in the affinity that oracles have with kledons, a type of magical language. A kledon is an utterance that someone hears, in a conversation or randomly, and understands to be prophetic.⁴¹ In many instances, the hearer interprets the utterance in a way that is different than its speaker intends. It is as though the utterance's alternative meaning, one that the hearer intuits, supplies or even insists upon, gives the utterance its status as a kledon. For the utterance's alternative meaning of which the speaker is unaware renders it innocent of the speaker's intentions and thus it seems to issue from someone or something other than its speaker. In some ways, this makes a kledon like one of the Pythia's oracles: to the degree that an oracle appears to exceed the knowledge of its speaker, the Pythia, whether because of its form or content, it appears unintended by her and thus is believed to be the true word of Apollo.⁴²

When Odysseus hears a suitor say to him, "Stranger, may Zeus and the other immortals give you your heart's greatest desire," Odysseus "delights in the kledon" (18.112). While the suitor simply wishes the beggar Odysseus well, Odysseus and the reader understand that since Odysseus' greatest desire is to see the suitors dead and his house restored—precisely what none of the suitors think might happen—Odysseus believes these words are a kledon.⁴³ In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, when Aegisthus will not back down in his verbal duel with the chorus, he says, "Well, then, I too have sword in hand and do not shrink from

41 On kledonomanancy, see COOK 1907, HALLIDAY 1913, 229–234, STANFORD 1939, 34–38, and JOHNSTON 2008, 131.

42 Confirmation of Delphi's connection to kledonomanancy comes from Plutarch who compares Delphic divination to kledonomanancy, on which see LINCOLN 2000, 167.

43 On kledonomanancy in the *Odyssey*, see also PODLECKI 1967, HIRVONENK 1969, FARAONE 1996, and LATEINER 2005a.

death,” to which the chorus replies, “you speak of your death. So be it. We accept the outcome.”⁴⁴ Like Odysseus, the chorus chooses to understand a statement in a way its speaker did not intend. More than this, though, both Odysseus and the chorus seem to think that the statement they heard signals what they desire to happen, and that once uttered the saying is efficacious. Peradotto writes, “The spoken word is thought to possess twofold power: it may be an index of what is happening or will happen, or it may actually precipitate events. In practice, these two aspects are not often easy to distinguish.”⁴⁵ It is rather audacious to convert a statement into a kledon, or to replace a speaker’s intention with one’s desires, as the Argive elders do. Significantly this process depends on the listener’s interpretation, not on the speaker’s intentions, and thus this process points out how important the social participation of listeners is for defining the nature of an utterance’s capacity, to state, predict or precipitate the future. It is the listener alone who can designate and make a spoken word into a kledon.

The word “kledon” is only used twice in Herodotus,⁴⁶ both in tales involving Spartans.⁴⁷ In a meeting concerning whether the Spartans would help liberate Ionia from the Persians, King Leotychides of Sparta interrupts to ask the name of the Samian who is speaking. Herodotus speculates that perhaps Leotychides was searching for a kledon. When the Samian replies “Hegesistratos” (that is, Army Leader), Leotychides accepts that this name is an omen and agrees to lead the Greek army against the Persians.⁴⁸ When Kleomenes of Sparta attempts to help Isagoras stage a coup in Athens, he attempts to enter the temple of Athena on the Acropolis.⁴⁹ The priestess commands him to stay out because Dorians are not allowed to enter the temple. Her statement is a command followed by an explanation of religious protocol. Kleomenes attempts to refute that he is a Dorian, and thus to fend off ominous import of the priestess’ words; he enters the temple and then is promptly forced out of Athens with the other Lacedaemonians. Herodotus explains that because Kleomenes did not heed or use the priestess’ kledon, he was soundly defeated. Lateiner’s concluding observation that “Herodotus draws attention...to real historical consequences of events perceived by some as unintended omens” locates his study in Herodotus’ social world and not in his literary persona, and in religious modalities not in political motivations. Lateiner’s observation need not imply that the priestess and Kleomenes had this precise conversation or that the Spartans had no political motivations to fight in Ionia. Rather he suggests that kledonomanancy was part of the social world of the tellers of these tales and was no less a social force than political interests, and was not

44 PERADOTTO 1969, 1–2.

45 PERADOTTO 1969, 7.

46 LATEINER 2005b, 41 n. 21.

47 LATEINER 2005b discusses four instances of kledonomanancy in Herodotus, all of which involve Spartans: 5.72, 6.50, 8.115 and 9.90–91. HOLLMANN 2011 provides a comprehensive overview of the instances of reading and interpreting ominous signs in Herodotus.

48 LATEINER 2005b, 41–42 on Herodotus 9.90–91.

49 LATEINER 2005b, 39 on Herodotus 6. 72

merely literary embellishment. These passages, like all Delphic oracles, are better understood as snapshots of how individuals made decisions that conjoined their interests with the divine word for their maximum benefit.

The affinity between oracles and kledons is evident in several oracle–shrines and further suggests the pervasiveness of seeking and finding divine guidance in human words. Some oracular shrines provided a method for an oracle–seeker to garner a chance utterance or kledon that they are then enjoined to regard as an oracle. Pausanias describes an oracle–shrine to Hermes Agoraios in a market place of Pharae.⁵⁰ There an oracle seeker whispers his question in the ear of Hermes’ statue, deposits a coin and lights oil lamps, and covers his ears with his hands. Once he leaves the market, he removes his hands and then accepts the first saying he hears as his oracle (Paus. 7.22.2–3). Pausanias mentions two other shrines that similarly institutionalize kledonomanancy (Paus. 7.22.4 and 9.11.7). In all of these instances to which Dodona might be added, kledonomanancy and oracles blend into each other. Even when an oracle is delivered to a client as at Delphi and hence lacks the inadvertent or accidental character of a kledon, there remains a similarity between kledons and oracles. There seems to be a belief that once oracles are uttered, they do not simply predict or foretell the future, but may have, as a kledon does, the power to create the future. Within the Delphic tradition, oracle–seekers and hearers may treat Delphic oracles as if they are kledons and make use of the blurring of the status of an oracle to their advantage by fulfilling the oracle, as they would like it to be, or in a way that comports with their desire. This is why oracles are often kept secret. Since they will come true, they can be made to come true in a way that benefits someone other than their recipient.

There are a group of Delphic oracles that have a special affinity with kledons and the oracle of Hermes and Hestia. These take the form of the “the first who meets you, greets you.”⁵¹ Perhaps the most well–known of these oracles is from Euripides’ *Ion*. Xuthos has been told that when he leaves the temple at Delphi, the first person he meets will be his son (*Ion* 534 ff./PW 190). The candidates who meet and greet the oracle–seeker are akin to the first thing heard. The oracle–seeker converts a random encounter into a fateful event by turning the person they have met into an object or person that overflows with unimagined meaning. Ion says, “I am the first you met? ... But how strange this is.” This process is indeed strange and also funny. Ion is suddenly imbued with the properties of an oracle or kledon. Part of the scene’s humor derives from the realization that what is trivial is fateful. What is happenstance and easily overlooked is what might be most significant.

The practice of interpreting oracles and kledons points to a belief in the

50 HALLIDAY 1913 places the shrine of Pharae in the middle of a spectrum of increasing intentionality in divine communications, whereas kledons and oracular shrines such as Delphi are at its end points.

51 The following Delphic oracles are of this type: PW 20, 60, 61, 62, 78, 190, 231, 295, 313, 322, 380, 381, 382, 408, 532.

efficacy of oracles and magical language that does not imply either an irrational mentality or a simple-minded adherence to the divine word.⁵² Working in the intersection of anthropology and cognitive science, Pascal Boyer argues for a causal relationship between a state of affairs considered significant yet not fully understood and a divinatory utterance: “clients and diviners consider the rituals as procedures which make it possible to obtain statements that are directly caused by the situation at hand. A link is established between a certain state of affairs... and the statement which describes this situation.”⁵³ This implicit belief in the causal nature of the situation does not depend on whether the divinatory technique is inspired, consisting of the utterances of possessed persons, or mechanical and depends on a reading of cards, stars, tea, or anthills. For an oracle, Boyer argues, is like a photograph that may be over or under exposed, blurred or unclear, but is still a photograph of its object, while a clear photograph of a model of said object is not.⁵⁴ The truth criteria of divinatory statements then is applied to “utterances as events caused, rather than sentences expressed.”⁵⁵ A divinatory statement, even one with little propositional value, must be remembered and repeated with no changes to its form because it is caused by events and is accurate. In Boyer’s analysis, then, prophecy falsification would necessarily pervade all divinatory systems. For if the divine omen is true, whatever its form, its recipient must seek to connect it to events. What is unique to Delphi is that prophecy falsification takes the form of interpretation along distinctly rhetorical lines and becomes embedded in ancient and modern discourses about Delphic ambiguity. Delphic divination and indeed many forms of divination in Greece hinge upon words and their meanings.⁵⁶

4. Delphic Ambiguity Revisited

52 In anthropological literature, reliance on divination or magic was considered an indication of a ‘primitive mentality’ until EVANS-PRITCHARD argued that people who believed in witches, oracles and magic were no less rational than those who did not. He thereby moved the study of divination out of the British intellectualist tradition of TYLOR and FRAZER and away from LEVI-BRUHL’S study of mentalities into functionalist and symbolic analyses where it has remained until recently. Sarah JOHNSTON 2005, 7 explains how these larger trends have influenced the study of divination in antiquity. “Because scholars knew quite well that many civic and religious institutions of the Greeks and Roman incorporated divinatory practices, and because many of these institutions has long been admired for their ‘rational’ accomplishments...it was difficult to put divination in the same category as magic.”

53 BOYER 1990, 73.

54 BOYER 1990, 78.

55 BOYER 1990, 91.

56 VERNANT 1991 notes that Greece is unusual because of the prevalence of speech and its interpretation in its divinatory systems. JOHNSTON’S book on divination (2008) confirms Vernant’s observation. While Greek prophets might read entrails, no elaborate and well-developed system of divination involving objects was more prevalent in Greece than the many divinatory shrines and prophets that depend on words.

How were oral tales with accurate and sometimes ambiguous oracles generated? Delphic oracles overlap with popular genres, deploy aural mnemonic devices, and depend on notions about divine language. The popular genres of proverbs and riddles⁵⁷ share two features with Delphic oracles that are relevant for examining Delphic ambiguity: metaphors and aural devices. In his analyses of style in oratorical prose and tragic diction, Aristotle presents metaphor as the defining feature of proverbs and riddles, thus indirectly offering an explanation for the overlap between oracles, proverbs and riddles.⁵⁸ There are four types of metaphor: species for species, species to genus, genus to species, and analogy.⁵⁹ When two interpretations are provided in the framing narrative of oracle containing a metaphor, the oracle can reasonably be labeled “ambiguous.” Moreover, such tales demonstrate that interpreting Delphic oracles was a rhetorical exercise that revolved around tropes.⁶⁰ While homonyms play a less prominent role in both riddles and proverbs, they appear often in oracles and, like metaphors, are only evident if two interpretations are offered in an oracle’s framing narrative. Thus oracles with homonyms and etymological play to which homonyms are related, are ambiguous.⁶¹ Aural dimensions of oracles, whether in verse or prose, such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, homoioteleuton or internal rhymes, are typical of “orational prose,” that is, orally transmitted prose with poetic features that aid in memorization. These devices often contribute to oracular ambiguity but do not fully account for it as tropes do.⁶² Aural devices nonetheless speak to the ways Delphic oracles were transmitted orally, and in creating oracles with repeating sound patterns, these devices mark even prose oracles as distinct from every-day language.

If Delphic oracles with two possible meanings that are not explicitly included in their narrative frame, but that are easily supplied, were included in a catalogue of ambiguous Delphic oracles, it would grow without limit. It is precisely this ob-

57 On Greek proverbs, see KINDSTRAND 1978, HUXLEY 1981, and SHAPIRO 2000 on proverbs in Herodotus. RUSSO 1983 outlines the aural devices typical of proverbs.

58 Aristotle *On Rhetoric* 1405b–1413a.

59 Aristotle *Poetics* 21 and *On Rhetoric* 1413a.

60 Species for species: PW 6, 7, 15, 16, 223, 26, 33, 46, 48, 54, 65, 68, 70, 73, 84, 92, 94, 95, 100, 110, 111, 112, 121, 129, 130, 133, 154, 160, 171, 189, 218, 266, 268, 290, 293, 300, 302, 309, 31, 311, 319, 329, 364, 378, 379, 407, 414, 421, 434, 436, 438, 439, 453, 477, 480, 513, 516, 517, 565, 567, 568, 593, 594, 608; Genus for species: PW 12, 53, 81, 107, 197, 259, 288, 289, 290, 371, 403, 418, 484, 531, 578. Genus for species: PW 1, 25, 31, 45, 46, 67, 109, 111, 121, 127, 131, 154, 180, 198, 222, 250, 306, 307, 311, 312, 329, 375, 423, 424, 434, 451, 579, 581. Genus-for-species metaphors sometimes blend into species-for-species metaphors. Thus some items in this category are dubious.

61 Homonyms: PW 7, 18, 31, 49, 86, 131, 146, 146, 161, 166, 168, 173, 180, 206, 230, 237, 258, 259, 267, 271, 359, 360, 436, 454, 511, 512, 525, 541, *Figura etymologia* are a related form of ambiguity: 133, 214, 225, 226, 227, 233, 368, 371, 387, 410, 412, 414, 443, 497, 498, 515, 600.

62 “Orational prose” in oral societies is a term coined by Miriam LICHTHEIM to describe Egyptian wisdom literature and adopted by Kevin ROBB 1983 to describe Heraclitus’ work. On these features in Delphic oracles, see MAURIZIO 2012.

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servation that makes clear that ambiguity lies in the eyes of interpreters who may choose to locate and interpret homonyms and metaphors. Just as Aegisthus' words acquire a double meaning because the chorus provides, indeed insists on, an interpretation that is different from what Aegisthus intended, so too an oracle may be supplied with several possible meanings.

The interpretative action of Delphic clients and listeners, then, was varied and creative, sometimes dependent on the client's ingenuity and desire and at other times revealing the client's fatalism or fears. Interpretations of oracle-seekers that deny disconfirmation are the instances where one can witness how oracles become ambiguous. Delphi's noted ambiguity is a consequence of clients and groups finding and creating ambiguity through their interpretation of oracles and in their story-telling. Both were dialogues, the first with a god and their fellow interpreters, and the second with their listeners, that explored the divine word in relation to their identity, circumstances, desires and political agendas.

5. Individualism

Scholars who explain Delphic accuracy through hypotheses that lead them to consider many oracles inauthentic credit ancient actors and writers with self-interested motives that lead them to forge, if not to interpret, oracles. This essay has explained Delphic accuracy through falsification and kledonancy: oracle seekers were constrained only by their confidence that the words of the oracle were true, as in the case of kledons, and could falsify (interpret endlessly) oracles, even create ambiguity, within acceptable rhetorical limits. The client had the authority to suture the divine word and human world in a way that comported with his desires and needs, even as the divine word was understood to be true and hence impervious to the intentions of its human enunciator and indifferent to the needs of its human listeners. This paradox suggests that Delphic divination belonged to creative and engaged clients and story-tellers as much as to its shrine and, further that Delphic divination supports the notion that religious "individualism," a concept developed primarily by sociologists to describe the modern world, may with some modification be considered an aspect of archaic Greek religion.

In *Invisible Religion*, Thomas Luckmann details the rise of religious individualism as a symptom and consequence of the transformative processes that mark the transition from the medieval to the modern world. These include industrialization, capitalism, the rise of the scientific method, post-Enlightenment and post-revolutionary definitions of individual freedom and rights, rationalization, secularization, social differentiation, localization, and individualization: the development of an individual's freedom, rights, interests and needs over any institutional, cultural or social affiliation, wherein the individual becomes his own reference point in an increasingly complex world and is able to exercise choice in all areas of his life. In the religious arena, individualism is best understood in

comparison to what it is not: a religiosity “concretely shaped by a historical church” as in the medieval world.⁶³

In Luckmann’s description of medieval religiosity, the divine realm is codified by doctrine found in sacred books and their commentaries and by officially sanctioned experts, who also oversee religious practices. The dominant religious institution oversees the individual’s connection to the divine realm and offers a coherent official model of that connection that in turn allows the institution to oversee most areas of the individual’s life. In its ideal, this formulation “implies a complete identity between the ‘official’ model of religion, the individual system of ‘ultimate’ significance and the individual pattern of priorities.”⁶⁴ As society becomes segmented and specialized, religious institutions multiply and each oversees an increasingly narrow slice of the social world and cedes ground to secular institutions. Consequently, individuals must apply religious doctrines to discrete and separate spheres of their lives to construct a system of ultimate significance. Gradually, their commitment to their religious institution and its doctrines weaken, as their scope for the selection of beliefs from different and competing religious, as well as moral and ethical systems, increases and generates “invisible religion,” the conglomeration of spiritual and religious beliefs from various and competing traditions that have no one public expression or institution.

In addition to Luckmann’s term “invisible,” modern religion is characterized by the collapse of a dualistic worldview in favor of a multiple and indeterminate universal structure, an emphasis on this world and not the afterlife, humanism, syncretism of semi-religious forms, flexibility, revisibility, pluralism, and an orientation towards authenticity and self-realization rather than salvation.⁶⁵ With the exception of the last item, this list might apply well to ancient Greek religion with its polytheism and local forms of worship, the absence of a sacred book and formalized doctrine, and its emphasis on this world not the next. While Luckmann recognizes aspects of religious individualism in the Hellenistic world, he posits that in earlier “simple societies” such as the cities in archaic Greece none existed.⁶⁶ For there, he argues, the official model of meaning and the individual system of ultimate meaning would be congruent. And yet, one cannot accept the assignment of Greek religion to the medieval side of the dichotomy between the modern religious individualism and medieval religiosity.

Robert Parker has recently emphasized the range of choices that individuals had in their selection of religious practices and philosophical commitments.⁶⁷ In his closing chapter, he asks “how, if at all an individual could choose particular kinds of relation to the gods.”⁶⁸ To answer this question, he explores how and whether variables such as location, social status, gender, membership in sub-

63 LUCKMANN 1967, 73.

64 LUCKMANN 1967, 79.

65 LAMBERT 1999, 308.

66 LUCKMANN 1967, 92.

67 PARKER 2011, 224–264.

68 PARKER 2011, 225.

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groups might influence religious practices before turning to the variety of religious practices an individual might pursue including public worship of private associations, mysteries, bewitching, and binding activities. He concludes that “Greek religion provided a strong frame work of social cohesion; it met a human need by opening channels of communication with that unseen world most humans believe to exist: but it did these things without insisting on any particular set of speculations about the character of that unseen world.”⁶⁹ Delphic divination specified the channel of communication, namely human language, of divine communication, but it did not summon nor demand adherence to its oracles. An oracle might instigate an individual’s (or group’s) search to wed circumstances to the divine word, but did not dictate how to achieve such a meaningful connection, other than through keen observation, the interpretation of rhetorical tropes, and careful attention to names or homonyms. The accuracy of the Delphic tradition redounds to the desire of individuals to communicate with the divine. Delphic divinatory practices allowed, even encouraged, individuals to take the authority to interpret the divine word through the prism of their self-interests, without necessitating the sacrifice of one to the other. By generating such a possibility, Delphic divination established that between the individual (or group) and the divine, there was not a doctrine, but a dialogue granting “free play to the life of the mind” such as Parker argues marked paganism.

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69 PARKER 2011, 264.

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