Inspiration and Interpretation

TEST CASE: ARISTONICE, A PYTHIA

The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives signals.

Heraclitus of Ephesus

Introduction:

When scholars whom I respect introduced me to Aristonice, they told me I would meet someone who was likely a “simple,” possibly “frail, illiterate woman,“ showing “signs of emotional instability and a tendency to abnormal behavior.” Her prophetic speaking occurred when she was in a “trance” or experiencing hallucinations, for she purportedly fell into an “altered state of consciousness,“ or had a “patterned dissociative identity,” or perhaps experienced frenzy, caused by self-induced hypnosis. When she spoke, one eminent scholar asserted, her utterances were “inarticulate and required ... redaction,” by officials (male, of course) at the sanctuary. To be sure, some scholars have passed less harsh judgments on her, but scholarly disagreement made me all the more eager to get to know her. After all she was a Pythia, a woman who served as Apollo’s spokesperson at his shrine at Delphi. And she did so at a crucial moment in Greek history. I was eager to meet her.

Soon, however, I became embarrassed, as I came to recognize the flagrant sexism of many of these characterizations. My only justification for having overlooked them is that they were embedded in an influential critique of Herodotus, our only primary source for Aristonice. Herodotus is often seen by reputable scholars as naïve and credulous, or even as a deliberate liar, who made false claims about his travels and sources, and misled anyone who would listen to him. His account of Aristonice is indeed one of the most puzzling parts of his narrative of the Persian wars. To a modern reader it seems bizarre and challenges

our beliefs and understanding. Eventually, however, following a principle adduced by the physicist John Wheeler to focus on the most strange and puzzling part of any phenomenon, I began to concentrate more intensely on this aspect of Herodotus' history, asking myself, What if Herodotus were right in presenting Aristonice as an intelligent, articulate person whose mode of thought, although very different from those found in the ancient marketplace -- or the modern academy -- made sense within her culture? How would that change our view of Aristonice, of gender roles, of bias ancient and modern, and maybe even of Greek culture more broadly? The first step in assessing such questions is to revisit Herodotus' story, filling in details that a fifth century author could assume his reader would know. Here is that story.

I. Aristonice's Story

In 481 BCE the Athenians realized that Xerxes, king of Persia, was determined to conquer them and all of Greece as well. This was no surgical punitive expedition, like the one turned back at Marathon a decade earlier. It was a massive invasion, a vast army coordinated with a powerful fleet for logistical and tactical support. All Greece, not just Athens, had every reason to be afraid. There was no room for compromise: Submit or be crushed was the demand.

In this desperate situation the Athenians surprise us. They send a delegation to consult one Aristonice, a prophetess who lives in the small, remote mountain town of Delphi. It would take a week or more for the hundred-mile journey by foot or horse, and more time still to arrange the consultation, go through the preliminary rituals, and return to Athens. While the delegates are away on this mission little progress can be made on developing a strategy. When they return, her words would have to be turned into action. It seems a strange decision and a risky delay at a time when the Persians are moving inexorably forward and so much depends on whether Athens resolves to fight to the end, surrender, or flee.

Aristonice, to be sure, was not just any woman, nor was Delphi some obscure town. As Pythia she spoke with the authority of Apollo, indeed as Apollo -- human for divine, female for male. And Delphi was no ordinary town, but a sanctuary devoted to two great divinities, Apollo and Dionysus, located in a place of stunning beauty on the slope of towering Mt. Parnassus. This town, moreover,

claimed to be the center of the Greek world, or, more precisely, using a body metaphor popular at Delphi, it was the omphalos, or navel. As such, Delphi served as the meeting place for a political body, "the Amphictyony," a league of states in north central Greece. Delphi provided a neutral and sacred place for many of its meetings. Over the centuries it had, moreover, become famous for the oracles the Pythia pronounced. Lavish dedications were sent as marks of respect and gratitude. On sacred matters, great and small, and also on major civic decisions, Delphi was frequently consulted.

It was clearly, then, a great honor for Aristonice to be chosen from among the women of Delphi to be the Pythia. Her responsibility was especially great because a predecessor of hers, Periallus, had been dismissed in a scandal (Herodotus 6.66). Aristonice had a doubly difficult task -- to restore Delphi's reputation, and to do so at a time when Greece was under a looming threat from Persia. How old Aristonice was at this point; what sort of family nurtured her; what education she had received; how she was trained for this responsibility, we do not know. Herodotus wastes little time on the back story, constructing instead a fast-paced narrative focused on a few crucial moments.

Herodotus is equally selective about the background to the Athenian consultation. Reading his account is like arriving late at the theater and coming in at beginning of the second act of a three-act play. We don't know what went on in the first act, that is, what question the Athenian delegates were to ask the oracle, and what kind of response they were hoping for. They were probably not expecting a straightforward prediction, since Delphi rarely directly foretold the future. The Pythia's response could be expected to be enigmatic. Apollo was, after all, known as *Loxias*, "the Oblique one". Possibly the Athenians were hoping for advice about what ritual acts, vows and sacrifices, would encourage divinities to help them in some way. Delphi was known for such responses, often given in the form of prosaic instructions about ritual to be performed. Yet, from the way Herodotus frames his narrative (especially 7.139.2) it appears the Athenians were at this point divided and demoralized by reports of the overwhelming scale of the Persian attack. The issue seemed to be whether to "capitulate or migrate," that is, submit to the Persians or pack up, lock, stock and barrel, and settle somewhere overseas, perhaps at Siris in southern Italy (Herodotus 8.62.2). If either of these policies were adopted, those Greeks who dared to stand up against Persia could

not count on Athens to lead their effort, nor rely on their fleet to join battle with the Persian navy.

Herodotus' story really begins with Act Two of the drama: what happened when the Athenian delegates made their consultation at Delphi. He moves forward rapidly knowing that he can rely on his ancient readers' knowledge of Delphic procedure and their ability to visualize the setting and the steps that preceded a consultation- the sacrifices and rituals the delegates would perform, and the measures a Pythia would take to purify herself, including a washing at the Castalian spring, the donning of a wreath of laurel leaves, the procession up the Sacred Way, past the small temple-like treasuries built by various cities to hold their dedications, and finally up to the terrace before the temple of Apollo. (This was not the temple visitors see today, but an archaic structure of late sixth century BCE; a reconstruction of its facade can be seen in Scott (2014) fig. 5.1, p. 101).

In the courtyard in front of the temple were inscribed "things useful for the life of human beings," maxims, that is, to guide individuals and communities. Some attributed them to Phemonoe, the first Pythia; others said they had been dedicated to Apollo by one of the Seven Sages (Pausanias 10.24.1). Before and after consulting the Pythia these inscriptions would remind one to Know Yourself, and Avoid Extremes, in effect framing and guiding the interpretation of what the Pythia said, and. more generally, guiding the administration of cities and households, as the philosopher Menedemus said (Diogenes Laertius 6.100).

When the time came for those consulting the Pythia to enter into the great hall, or megaron, of the temple, some Delphic official would escort them from the bright sunlight toward the "not to be entered place," the adyton where the Pythia presided (Herodotus 7.140.3 and 141.3).

Eyes adjust slowly to the dim light within a Greek temple. There might be dense clouds of incense as well. Perhaps it was first Apollo himself who could be made out, - today we would say a cult statue; but Greeks of this period would speak and probably think of what they were seeing as in some sense the god himself. At the time of the building of this temple Apollo was most likely represented as a kouros, that is, as a young man, with an elegant hairdo, arms close to his side and stepping forward with a trace of a confident smile on his

face. He appears naked, as if he had just come down to the temple from competing in the Pythian games, held at the stadium higher up on the site. This widespread form of Archaic Greek art survives at Delphi in the muscular representations of the mighty Argive heroes, Cleobis and Biton. The cult statue of Apollo, would probably have represented the god as unbearded, unlike Zeus, Poseidon, Dionysus and other Olympian grown-up males. The message is clear: unlike these mature divinities Apollo is still a teenager and his beard has not yet fully developed. He was the eternal teenager, not someone wise in the ways of the world, but brash and fresh – not to mention sexually vigorous. Aristotle notes that teenagers "*express themselves in the most intense manner. They are in raging passion when they speak*" (*Rhetoric* 3.11.16, 1413 a). Aristotle has Achilles in mind, but Apollo might fit the description as well. If so, Apollo could be the opposite of what the Delphic maxims enjoined. Paradox, however had to be expected in such a sacred and disorienting space. In such a setting speech might not match that in the outside world; the contours of reality might also take a shape all their own.

Gradually those consulting the Pythia could make her out as well, seated on the ritual "tripod," to one side of Apollo's statue. This was a three-legged, gold-plated (Aristophanes *Plutus* 9) construction that resembled the tripods on which Greek women placed the cauldrons to do much of their cooking. At first sight this might seem out of place, but again, in this space the familiar became unfamiliar. Over time the tripod had come to be the mark of prophetic authority. The symbolism of the tripod sent a strong and disturbing message: one had entered a setting where conventional gender boundaries, and social patterns might not prevail. This tripod was not a kitchen utensil; this woman was not someone confined to the household. Here, in Apollo's hall, close to his symbolic presence, she might herself seethe with emotions, her own and those of Apollo, and speak with authority even on the most crucial issues confronting Greek society.

In a highly ritualized setting ritualized speech was only to be expected. To be sure, on routine matters the Pythia might answer questions in straight-forward prose. In fact, prose was the most frequent medium for Delphi's responses. Of about 600 reported in the ancient sources, 175 or so are in hexameters. The rest are almost entirely in prose, as Lisa Maurizio (2017) has emphasized. But when the stakes were high, the Pythia's language was lofty as well. When she spoke in

verse it was in a meter we associate with Homer's epics and other long narrative poems. It was successfully adapted into Latin as Vergil showed in his *Aeneid.* English poets sometimes choose it for lengthy presentations of quasi-historical tales, as Longfellow did for his poem *Evangeline*:

> *This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,*
>
> *Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,*
>
> *Stand like Druids of old, with voices sad and prophetic ... (*Henry Wadsworth Longfellow *Evangeline* 1 ff.)

When use in English the meter may seem ponderous, perhaps pompous and often long-winded. In Greek, however, it is well adapted not only to long narratives but also to stories of the gods (s in Hesiod's *Theogony*), to hymns in honor of a divinity (as in the Homeric *Hymns*), and to pronouncements by a god such as Apollo. It was a high-end and highly appreciated meter, suited to situations of high significance. When used in Delphic prophecies the meter did not ride on the coattails of epic poetry. Delphi, indeed, claimed the hexameter as its own; the first Pythia, Phemonoe, had been the first to use this meter, when the sanctuary was still being founded, even before Homer and Hesiod had begun their compositions (Connor 2019). Subsequent Pythias, including Aristonice, carried on that tradition. Their hexameter oracles, then, had a power of their own, giving voice to the will of Apollo and could thereby express and release powerful emotions.

Herodotus did not have to explain all this; nor was he under any obligation to give the Pythia's name. On the contrary, since Greeks typically avoided speaking in public the name of a respectable woman, Herodotus might simply have referred to her as "the Pythia." Instead, he speaks her name, Aristonice. It is an elegant, even aristocratic sounding name, and – something that fascinated Herodotus – a signifying name as well, that is, one that resonated with a historical situation or outcome. The name Aristonice combines two elements, "Best" and "Victory," as if her very identity points to the final, best of all possible outcomes – a Greek victory over the Persians. Of course, of this outcome the Athenian delegation had as yet no clue.

This was the moment for the delegates to put to her their question, whatever it might be. But, before they could speak, Aristonice begins to chant. Their question is never asked. Aristonice breaks with convention, and takes the initiative. If the inquiry had been a routine one, on a ritual matter of some sort, she would listen, then respond in prose. This, however, was no ordinary matter, where prose would suffice. Heightened urgency demanded the elevated language and rhythms of dactylic hexameter. Fear and excitement, rather than placid beauty, needed to be given voice through word choice and style. Michael Flower (2008 p. 238) may be right in describing the verse as "dismal ... bizarre and illogical," but the syntactical irregularities and shifting imagery reflect the urgency of the situation and the intensity of the Pythia's concern. They provide a glimpse into the personality of the Pythia herself. .

How did these verses sound? Herodotus uses only conventional terminology for consulting an oracle, but his readers would know that such oracles would not just be "spoken;" they would be sung or chanted. That is the way Homer's epics were probably performed; aeidein, to *sing* or *chant*, is the verb Homer used in the first line of the *Iliad* urging the goddess who inspires him to chant about the rage of Achilles. The verb is also used for the way the Pythia delivered her prophecies. And it was no wispy whispering from a "frail" woman, but could be loud and booming, as Euripides indicates in *Ion line* 92. In Herodotus, Aristonice begins by giving full voice to how desperate the situation was:

> *Oh wretches, why are you sitting here? Leave! Flee from your houses and city.*
> *Flee the ends of the earth and your city's lofty headlands!"*

Then, instead of elaborating on the fire and destruction awaiting Athens, she juxtaposes, as if in free association with the word "headlands" (akra karēna), an image of a body ripped apart:

> *For neither will the head (kephalē) remain in place, nor the body,*
> *Nor the feet beneath, nor the hands, nor are the parts between left;*

Images of the human body also emerge in an oracle given close to this time to Argive inquirers at Delphi:

... sit, being on your guard (pephylagmenos),

> *and guard (pephylagxo) the head (kephalēn). The head (karē) shall preserve the body*." (Herodotus 7.148.3).

Although this oracle, like the one to the Athenians in 7.140, uses body imagery and juxtaposes different words for *head*, it does not take the further step of imagining the body torn apart as if in a Dionysiac sparagmos. The oracle to the Athenians evokes such an image of worshippers, often called Bacchants, catching a wild animal and ripping it limb from limb. The sparagmos is an ancient practice among the Greeks, best known to us from Euripides' *Bacchae*, where in her frenzy Pentheus' own mother kills her son in this way. In Aristonice's oracle, however, the destruction comes not from Greek women worshipping Dionysus, but from the god of war, riding in a barbarian war chariot:

> *But all is ruined, for fire and Ares, speeding in a Syrian chariot, will bring you low.*

It is clear whose side the war god is on. But whose body is it that is being torn apart – Athens', divided and factionalized, or that of the Amphictyony whose members seem likely to submit to Persia, or is it that of all Greece, including wavering Peloponnesians? Where is the needed leadership to come from if Athens cannot be at the head of the resistance? The oracle hints at such questions but provides no solution. In a situation such as this a Pythia was more likely to deliver a provocation than answer.

The next lines take up the image of fire, which now ravages not Athens alone but many other places as well:

> *Many a fortress too, not yours alone, will he shatter;*
> *Many a shrine of the gods will he give to the flame for devouring;*

Then the body metaphor returns:

> *Sweating for fear they stand, and quaking for dread of the enemy,*
> *Running with gore are their roofs, foreseeing their unavoidable sorrow;*

Then the Pythia directly addresses the Athenian delegates, using the distinctive Greek grammatical form reserved for groups of two. She returns to her initial

demand, that the delegates leave the adyton, and ends with an enigmatic command:

> *Therefore I bid you two, depart from the sanctuary. Scatter your spirit (thymos) onto your sorrow. (*Herodotus 7.140.2-3. tr. Godley modified).

Scholars argue about the meaning of the last clause, whether it was a way of saying "Abandon hope," or held out some possibility for courageous action. The Athenian delegates, however, seem not to have dallied over it, nor over the interpretation of the whole twelve lines of verse. Instead, they prepared to return to Athens with what seemed clearly bad news.

If the delegates had paused to reflect on the lines, they might have noticed that they are carefully structured, dividing in the middle (lines 6 and 7), moving from an apparent focus on Athens, to a consideration of other parts of Greece. The poem is a diptych: when its two parts are juxtaposed, they send a message about Greece as a whole: Athens' disasters are Greece's disasters, and vice versa. The lines point, moreover, to a core problem in the resistance to Persia- the need for leadership among the Greek states. By implication, without the leadership of Athens the whole structure of Greece will disintegrate in flame and blood. "Frightening and throwing [the Athenians] into fright" was the way Herodotus described many prophecies that circulated at this time (7.139.6). If the delegates had returned to Athens with just this response, the Athenians would most likely have been discouraged, their navy would not have been used against the Persians, and the Greek cause almost certainly would have been lost.

The Second Oracle:

But wait. The second act of the drama is not over. A distinguished Delphian, Timon, son of Androboulos (the name means "Manly-counsel"), persuaded them to go back into the temple, not, however, to seek clarification of the first oracle, but to entreat the god for a new and better response. This they did, observing all the ritual requirements of dress and accoutrements needed for ritual supplication, but adding to their entreaties an implicit threat: They would stay there until they died – and death, everyone understood, would defile this most pure and sacred of places.

When Aristonice assumed her place on the tripod for the second time, the Athenian delegates presented their petition to lord Apollo, asking for something better *for the fatherland* (patris: 7.141.2). That word marks a reframing of the Athenians' question, for they are approaching the realization that "fatherland" need not mean Athens alone, but could refer to Greece as a whole. That understanding can be seen again when the Athenians insist on the point (Herodotus 8. 57.2) against the view of a narrow-minded Corinthian (8. 61.1.). This reframing of the issue led to a response very different from that of the first oracle. Aristonice again utters twelve hexameter verses, and ends with an image of scattering. This response, however, evokes an image of the gods on Olympus, echoing a scene at the beginning of Homer's Odyssey (1.44 ff.). In the *Odyssey* Athena entreated Zeus to speed her favorite mortal, Odysseus, on his way home to Ithaca, and Zeus agreed. Now, however, when Pallas Athena entreats him for her favorite city, Athens, Zeus refuses to help:

> *Vainly does Pallas strive to appease great Zeus of Olympus;*
> *Words of entreaty are vain, and so too cunning counsels of wisdom.*

This dashed any hopes the Athenians might still have harbored that their defeat would be warded off by the intervention of Olympian divinities. They would be on their own. There is, however, an ambiguity:

> *Nevertheless, I will speak to you again of strength adamantine*

To whom does this "strength adamantine" belong? The Persians'? The Pythia? Or does the contrast represented in the translation by "nevertheless" hint that the Athenians themselves might be so unbendingly strong"? It certainly would not be easy for them. Athens had to expect that the superior land power of Persia would sweep through all Attica, and not Attica alone but also the land of those Boeotians near Mt. Cithaeron, including the Plataeans, who had the courage to resist the Persian invaders:

> *All will be taken and lost that the sacred border that Cecrops*
> *Holds in keeping today, and the dales divine of Cithaeron;*

Only after being overrun in this way, could Athens hope that Zeus might allow them some protection:

Yet a wooden wall will by Zeus all-seeing be granted
To the Trito-born, a stronghold for you and your children.

Triton-born Athena may have won a concession from Zeus, but it comes in the form of a riddle. The Athenians, once again, are on their own, for the oracle provides no clue about the meaning of "wooden wall." Instead the oracle swiftly moves on, repudiating a traditional value of Greek armies, never to turn their backs and run away from an enemy. The time will come for land combat, but before there is any indication of when, the oracle again moves on, this time to a puzzling mention of Salamis, and then back to the idea of a land battle:

Await not the host of horse and foot coming from Asia,
Nor be still, but turn your back and withdraw from the foe.
Truly a day will come when you will meet him face to face.
Divine Salamis, you will bring death to women's sons
When the corn is scattered or the harvest gathered in. (Herodotus 7.141.4, tr. Godley, modified.)

The oracle comes to its ending, but again it is enigmatic. This is the way Delphi often worked. Hearing the oracle was just the start of a process. The next step was for the delegates to bring written texts of the oracles back to Athens for debate over their interpretation.

Interpreting the Oracles:

A century earlier, delegates who had consulted at Delphi might well have brought the words of an oracle back for interpretation by the aristocrats who held power in the city. Now, however, in a feisty, emerging democracy the third act of the drama is played out in debate in an assembly of several thousand -- often unruly -- Athenian citizens. It had become their task and prerogative to interpret oracles, and then turn interpretation into implementation. After initial discouragement at the tone of the oracles, a change of mood seems to have taken place, and the challenge of interpretation seems to have energized the Athenians, as if below the bleak surface of Aristonice's hexameters lay another message: "You have the ability to lead Greece to victory. All you have to do is solve a riddle or two."

Solving riddles, moreover, was not an unfamiliar challenge to ordinary Greeks. They were brought up on riddles and familiar with untangling the often ambiguous "signs," sēmata, on which riddles depended. Early Greek literature is full of such signs and riddles (ainigmata). Mythic characters, such as Oedipus and wily Odysseus, were good at deciphering them.

The debate in the Athenian assembly, as Herodotus presents it, turned on two puzzling phrases, "wooden wall," and "divine Salamis." The meaning of the first of them seemed clear to some elderly Athenians who had heard that "in old time the acropolis of Athens had been fenced by a thorn hedge" (Herodotus 7.142.1, tr. Godley), which they thought was a sort of "wooden wall," behind which the Athenians, or as many as could crowd onto the Acropolis, could hunker down until the Persians, as they hoped, went away (Herodotus 7.142.1). Since the Acropolis was not a large area, and those who crowded into it could be starved into submission, this interpretation was not compelling, but it did move discussion beyond the "capitulate or migrate" alternatives.

Ultimately the antiquarianism of the old men gave way to a metaphorical interpretation: "wooden wall" meant the hulls of the ships of Athens' navy. These triremes were not transport or cruise ships. They were not designed to carry cargo or passengers, but to maneuver swiftly and sink enemy ships by ramming them. If "wooden wall" alluded to these warships, Athens should seek to engage the Persians in the most favorable location possible, such as the narrow straits off the island of Salamis, where the mobility of the Greek triremes would give them the advantage. That interpretation, fusing together language and strategy, was attractive, but the local oracle experts (chrēsmologoi) argued that the oracle foretold disaster for Athens in any engagement near Salamis. In their favor was the statement, "*O divine Salamis*, *you will bring death to women's sons*," which seemed to betoken severe losses. If the oracle experts were right, the Athenians might be able to flee overseas escorted by these ships, but if so the Persian expedition, both army and fleet, would move forward in relentless co-ordination. Greece would be lost.

Turning Prophecy into Victory:

Then, and only then, according to Herodotus' narrative, did the great man Themistocles enter the debate. His contribution was not to explain that "wooden

wall" referred to the hulls of ships, for that had already been done for him. Instead, he focused on one word, "*divine*" or "godly" (theiē). He claimed that the experts, the chrēsmologoi, were mistaken in thinking that the adjective, divine, meant that Salamis would be a disaster for Athens. The word, he argued, was too gentle for that. If disaster for the Athenians had been the message, the oracle would have used another word, such as schetliē, "*cruel.*" Rightly understood, he argued, the god was urging them to get ready for a naval battle in which, yes, many "women's sons" would die near Salamis, but they would be Persians not Greeks.

This interpretation was a brilliant stroke on Themistocles' part. Although it was by no means an inescapable inference from the texts brought home from Delphi, it evoked knowledge of the many Salaminian divinities that were worshipped in Attica as well as on the island. He thereby shifted the imagination of his fellow citizens from cowering on the Acropolis or running away to Italy, to an island endowed with sacral power. The hero Ajax was venerated there (Herodotus 8.121). There were, in addition, countless other heroes and divinities venerated on Salamis, many of whom are known to us from Attic inscriptions. They might indeed contribute their divine support to a well-planned resistance. One adjective, "divine," deftly explicated, could shift discussion from the calculation of Persia's overwhelming military advantage, to thoughts of powerful help from divine allies. It was a morale changer. The Persians might, after all, be defeated – by Athenians battling with divine help from the wooden wall of their fleet. The debate over the interpretation of the oracles thereby shifted from whether to surrender or to flee, to consideration of how to resist or defeat the Persians

Implementing this strategy meant that as many Greek ships as possible should be mustered for the battle, including the ships of cities in the Peloponnese. To help persuade them, the command of the entire fleet was left in the hands of the Spartan, Eurybiadas. Local pride must not stand in the way of PanHellenic victory. In the end over 370 allied ships (Herodotus 8. 43 ff.) engaged a numerically vastly superior Persian fleet – and won. The victory derived in large part from the brilliance of Themistocles, evident in his explication of the oracle, and soon thereafter in the strategy he formulated to entice the Persians to engage in a location favorable to the Greek fleet. When the time for battle

neared, most Athenians evacuated their city, many fleeing to Salamis. There they could watch their fleet defeat the Persian ships in the narrows between the north end of that island and the mainland. There was still a huge Persian army to be dealt with, capable of ravaging Attica and defiling the Acropolis, but its very size made it difficult for it to operate for long without logistical support from the sea.

Remembering the Victory:

In the Greek memory of the victory Aristonice fades from view. Delphi, however, received lavish thank-offerings from the allied cities. Herodotus reports that after the victory, the Greeks

> *made a division of the booty, and sent away first fruits (akrothinia) to Delphi, from which was made a statue in the image of a man, twelve cubits high, holding in his hand the prow (akrotērion) of a ship.* (Herodotus 8.121).

Herodotus enjoys the word play that brings together akrothinia (the top of the pile of booty used for thank offerings) and a word for the prow of a ship (akrotērion). But he is even more impressed by the almost 18-foot statue, which Pausanias 10.14.5 makes clear was of Apollo himself. It was almost certainly of polished bronze, evoking Apollo’s title, “Phoebus,” dazzling (phoibos), which described the visual impact of the statue as it appeared in the bright Greek sun. Looking up, one would see not the benches, sails, and rigging of a ship, but the ram of its prow along with part of the hull, the “wooden wall” to which Aristonice had alluded. No winged Victory is mentioned, but perhaps this monument, while different in many respects, was similar to the ship’s prow that now dominates the grand stairway of the Louvre, and once commemorated a naval victory near Samothrace.

After the Persians’ land army was defeated at Plataea in 479 BCE, another victory marker was dedicated at Delphi: a tall bronze tripod holding a great cauldron, which stood on the heads of three intertwined serpents. The tripod surely evoked the one from which Aristonice prophesied, in this way linking her to the victory. Her name, however, found no place on the monument, although the names of the allied cities that stood up against the Persians can still be seen inscribed upon the coils of the serpents in its current location in Constantinople.

Another kind of victory marker was situated back in Athens. While the Greek victory could be commemorated and interpreted in several ways, there is little doubt how Themistocles wanted it to be construed. In a prominent location in Athens, a small but attractive temple has been uncovered, almost surely the one dedicated by Themistocles who built, Plutarch reports,

> *the temple of Artemis, whom he surnamed Aristoboulē, or Best Counsel, intimating that it was he who had given the best counsel to the city and to the Hellenes.* (Plutarch *Themistocles* 22).

The construction of the temple was a clever means of self-promotion. Themistocles did not claim that he had provided on his own the advice behind the victory. That might seem too arrogant. Instead the credit goes to Artemis (with no word about her brother Apollo). The symbolism is clear and apt. Themistocles was reaffirming at one level the statement Herodotus (8.109.3) ascribes to him, " ... we have not done this [the victory at Salamis] by our own might. It is the work of gods and heroes". This was conventional piety, but at another level, the dedication of the temple (and perhaps of a portrait statue of Themistocles within it) called attention to the importance of the advice Themistocles had given the Athenians and to the strategy he developed for the battle. The temple did all that for him by implying that he had access to divine guidance.

But why ascribe such guidance to Artemis? In Athens she was not associated with deliberation or inspired advice. Themistocles, however, may have had in mind a parallelism and a word play. The parallelism was, of course, between Artemis and her brother Apollo, both sources of guidance; the word play brought together Aristonikē at Delphi and Aristoboulē in Athens. Themistocles' dedication of the temple, then, was a way of minimizing Aristonice's contribution to the victory, and deflecting attention from Apollo to his sister.

Not content with that, Themistocles, it seems, promulgated a story that Aphrodite expressed her favor for him, and thereby for the Greeks, at the battle of Salamis. Although it is only attested to us in a very late source, the story indicates a dove appeared and settled on Themistocles' trireme. Themistocles showed his gratitude for the goddess's help by dedicating a shrine to her in the Piraeus. The iconography was obvious, for doves are Aphrodite's birds, and nested in large numbers on Salamis (Aeschylus *Persians* 309).

Over time Themistocles' fame grew while Aristonice's was almost forgotten. The historian Thucydides does not mention her but in his view Themistocles stood out for his raw intelligence and natural ability (physis). These qualities came not from rigorous training or from learning from experience. Rather, he embodied a kind of foresight, but not the enigmatic inspiration one might hope for from an oracle. When a crisis was at hand, he needed the least deliberation (boulē) to assess it. And to describe his ability to foresee the future Thucydides coins, it seems, a new word, eikastēs, saying Themistocles was the "*best at assessing probabilities." eikastēs). To sum it all up, by the strength of his natural ability and the brevity of his training this man became most effective at improvising what needed to be done*" (Thucydides 1.138.3). Superlatives describing him continue into the Roman period, when, for example, Cornelius Nepos proclaims that "no one is thought superior, and few are considered equal to him." (Cornelius Nepos *Life of Themistocles* 1).

Aristonice the Person:

Despite such neglect of Aristonice an outline of her personality can be detected. In Herodotus she appears as an articulate woman of strong will and intense emotion, willing to speak out even before the inquirers put their question to her. Her intensity found expression through the discipline of composing hexameter verse, well-structured and carefully balanced, as in the diptych pattern of the first of her oracles recorded by Herodotus.

Mastering the art of composing such verse demanded, as we shall see, discipline and concentration. Though she was subject to and spoke for a male divinity, her verses show that she had found her own voice. Between the lines of her oracles one can detect a passionate commitment to the Greek cause. This she conveyed in provocative enigmatic language, as if believing her riddles could awaken fresh ideas and a new strategy. Her imagination was vivid, as if she were assailed by one fragment after another of a shattered ideal of stability and unity.

Through much of Greek antiquity writers about divination at Delphi focused on the message rather than the messenger. That is, they were less interested in the Pythias than in the oracles themselves, their interpretation and effectiveness, and, of course, on the lavish dedications given in gratitude for them. . Very little is said about the state of mind of the women who prophesied. The issue was

whether an individual utterance that purported to be inspired was in fact helpful once carefully interpreted and put into action.

More recent discussions reverse the pattern, dismissing the possibility that divination might somehow help in decision making, but fascinated by the prophetess' state of mind. They want to know about the messenger more than the message. The oracles are viewed as propaganda or flummery, while the inner experience of the Pythia becomes the center of attention. The inquiry then takes the form of identifying the mental disorder, drug, or other agent that was at work.

The interest in the mental state of the prophesying woman was already evident in Roman times, as was the search for a material explanation. We hear stories of exhalations from the earth, especially in a "chasm" at Delphi. The armchair geographer Strabo (9.3.5), a near contemporary of the emperor Augustus, provided one such explanation. He cited unnamed sources who claimed there was a deep cave or chasm near the temple at Delphi. From its narrow mouth an "inspirational breath" (pneuma enthousiastikon) arose. When the Pythia, seated on her lofty tripod, received this breath, she prophesied, sometimes in prose and sometimes in verse. The "breath," in other words, was believed to be a psychotropic exhalation from deep within the earth, which inspired the Pythia.

In our own time, despite the fact that excavators at Delphi have found no such chasm, Strabo's account has been modified and given an ostensibly more scientific basis. Some researchers have caught hold of geological evidence of a crack in the bed rock under the temple. From this, they conjecture, ethylene vapors arose sufficient to induce in the Pythia a trance, while temple officials standing nearby remained unaffected and translated her delirious ravings into proper hexameters, cleverly ambiguous, to promote the reputation of Delphi. Scott (2014, pp. 20 - 24) shows the weakness of this theory.

Rather than seeking for cracks in the bedrock and vapors other scholars have preferred to look for cross cultural parallels to Greek divination, to neo-Assyrian tablets or Tibetan oracles, as Flower (2008, pp. 225 ff.) has skillfully done, or seek out parallels in Greco-Roman texts describing women prophesying, such as the Sibyl in book six of Vergil's *Aeneid*, or Lucan's raving Phemonoe in

book five of his *Civil War*. Or, avoiding non-Greek texts, one can follow Maurizio (2017) and turn to the moment in the *Odyssey* when Helen speaks prophetically about an eagle flying overhead (*Odyssey* 15.173). These examples show how widespread divination has been, but they tell us little about the state of mind of a prophesying Pythia. In none of these instances is a psychotropic agent mentioned. Their silence on this matter is a cautionary reminder to those who search for a diagnosis for a psychological abnormality, but the whole effort to burrow within a Pythia's head may itself be flawed from the start.

Greek prophetesses, including Pythias, seem rarely to have said anything publicly about their experiences when prophesying. Perhaps a taboo forbade such talk, or it was simply not done, since for them the important matter was the prophecy itself, not the state of mind behind it. Some male authors, however, thought they knew what was happening. Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon* has the Trojan prophetess Cassandra speak to a chorus of sympathetic women about an overpowering closeness to Apollo: "he wrestled with me and he breathed delight" (1201, tr. Lattimore). Males who believed they could understand female inspiration in sexual terms persisted through the centuries, among both polytheists and Christians, notably Origen of Alexandria, writing around 248 CE:

> *It is said of the Pythia whose oracle seems to have been the most celebrated, that when she sat down at the mouth of the Castalian cave, the prophetic Spirit of Apollo entered her private parts; and when she was filled with it, she gave utterance to responses which are regarded with awe as divine truths.* (Origen *Against Celsus*, 7. 3).

Efforts to burrow into a Pythia's psyche are, I fear, unlikely to yield more than negative results.—Pythias were not often frenzied; they seem not to have spoken under the influence of psychotropic agents. We can, however, come closer to understanding the Pythia by examining the ways in which she delivered her prophecies. In consultations about routine matters – rituals, sacrifices, and the like, for example- the Pythia seems usually to have spoken in prose. In more complex matters, the hexameter was the medium of choice. Why the hexameter?

The next section of this essay explores two approaches to this question, – first, when a divine female is said to appear to a mortal man, and, second, when a

person speaking prose starts using hexameter cadences. These two aspects of the hexameter, it turns out, converge at the point of what we call “inspiration,” and so may help us better understand the Pythia when she prophesied in this way, and perhaps the nature of inspiration among the Greeks more generally.

II. Why the Hexameter?

As we have seen, at Delphi the hexameter was not regarded as a borrowing from Homeric epics or other epic poets. The connotations of this verse form can be brought into sharper focus by observing how poets in early Greece (mostly male) used it. Most striking is the regularity with which they allude to female sources of inspiration. The pattern is widespread; such figures are invoked, for example, in the first lines of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. More revealing, however, may be the opening of Hesiod’s *Theogony* where Muses who dance on Mt. Helicon in Boeotia are described as going about at night, veiled in thick mist. Hesiod does not describe them with vivid visual images; instead he lets them be heard as they sing hymns (a hexameter genre) to Zeus, Hera, and other divinities. Their praise of Olympians, however, gives way to praise of “black Night and the sacred clan of the other divinities who live forever” (lines 20 f.). Who are these other immortals? They are not named, but they address Hesiod in this way:

> *You shepherds of the wilderness, poor fools, nothing but bellies,*
>
> *We know how to say many false things that seem like true sayings,*
>
> *But we know also how to speak the truth when we wish to. (*Hesiod *Theogony* lines 26 – 28, tr. Lattimore).

The words are riddle-like - almost oracular - leaving it to those who hear them to figure out which things in the poem are true and which are false. That is a frequent pattern in such poetry; the hexameter reinforces the poet’s claim of inspiration but leaves interpretation to the listener.

Hesiodic themes recur in a poem written in the fifth century BCE by Parmenides of Elea, often considered the most brilliant philosophical mind before Socrates. Those who admire him, however, have not found it easy to agree about

the meaning of his work. The reason for their differences is apparent at the outset of the poem, as may be seen in this new verse translation by Richard McKim:

Here is the start of Parmenides' song, in a new verse translation by Richard McKim:

Horses! The mares of my chariot team once took me as far
as my heart could aspire to go, transporting me over the road
that leads to the goddess—yes, the road so often sung of
that keeps the man of vision on the move from city to city.

Sharp-witted and straining with all their might, those horses sped
my chariot toward its goal, with maidens in procession as their guides.
Its well-honed pair of wheels spun the axle, shrieking
in its sockets as the sparks flew aside, while the daughters of the Sun
forsook the halls of the house of darkness, hastening to escort me
into light, where they seized their veils and stripped them from their faces.

(Parmenides *DK* 28 B 1, tr. McKim).

Parmenides clearly decided not to model his work on the prose treatises developed in Miletus and elsewhere by natural philosophers such as Thales and his successors. Instead he positioned it in the tradition of poems recounting moments of inspiration. At its outset he evokes Hesiod's *Theogony*, but with greater visual intensity, inviting his listeners to imagine him traveling from city to city by chariot, escorted on his journey by mysterious female divinities. He is positioning his work, in other words, not as "philosophy," as we understand the term, but in a tradition of hexameter poetry. His claim on our attention is not careful observation and rigorous argumentation, but the challenge he poses to assumptions about what is real and what is merely appearance. That challenge is expressed as revelation, in the symbolic form of the removal of the veils (apokalypsis) of the female figures. It is not, notably, a revelation from a male authority figure to those whose duty is simply to remember and accept what has been said. Those qualities are for prose. Instead, those who learn of a revelation similar to that envisioned in Parmenides' poem must be prepared to struggle to interpret it. Hexameter poetry of this sort betokens not only inspiration but the

need for interpretation as well. The poem must not, then, be reduced to hard-edged propositions, but accepted as a riddle needing solution. In this respect it resembles the hexameter oracles from the Pythia - enigmatic, and demanding careful interpretation. Hexameter verse sends, then, a double signal: it is the product of inspiration and the start of an interpretative process. Among the early Greeks these two go hand in hand. That, as we have seen when the Athenians received Aristonice's oracles, can be challenging and contentious, but it is a vital part of a decision making process widely used in antiquity.

A Second Approach to the Hexameter:

Another way of understanding such poetry in Archaic and Classical Greece is to examine passages in which a person who has been speaking in prose breaks into a hexameter cadence. For example, in Plato's *Symposium* (208 c), when the prophetess Diotima waxes eloquent about the power of Eros she is represented as temporarily shifting into hexameter verse. Soon thereafter she uses another poetic phrase, "a deathless memory for valor" (208 d), which also has a hexameter or elegiac rhythm. Since these lines do not come from any known poet, readers are probably meant to think of them as Diotima's own, a reflection of heightened eloquence as her speech becomes more emotional – or inspired.

Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus* detects such an added dimension to the hexameter when he catches himself slipping into this verse form. He asks his young friend, Phaedrus:

> *Did you not notice, my friend, that I am already speaking in hexameters, not mere dithyrambics, even though I am finding fault with the lover? But if I begin to praise the non-lover, what kind of hymn do you suppose I shall raise? I shall surely be possessed of the nymphs.* (Plato *Phaedrus* 241 e, tr. Fowler).

Socrates' chain of thought runs along these lines: In the speech he has just given he is surprised to find himself becoming so eloquent. When his speech culminates in the hexameter line

> *As wolves adore lambs, so lovers befriend the child they love.* (241d)

Socrates recognizes its poetic ring. It's not that of a free-verse dithyramb, but of a hexameter. Since he recognizes that is a meter for inspired utterances, he

imagines what will happen if he turns from finding fault with the lover of boys, to the more exalted theme he has in view, making the case for the non-lover. In rhetorical terms this involves a shift from condemnation (a psogos) to an encomium (an epainos), where elevated language is very much in order. In such a mode, Socrates fears he may start chanting a hymn – hexameters, of course. At such an exalted moment, he thinks, nymphs, the inspiring divinities associated with the rustic setting of the dialogue, might take control of him. That would be an intense form of inspiration, a frightening prospect for any man, but especially for Socrates who stakes so much on the give and take of short questions and answers. Speaking in hexameters would be a sign of being swept off his dialectical feet.

Socrates' comments, then, present us with a surprising possibility – that hexameters are not simply well suited to conveying a heightened state of eloquence or consciousness, but may also help *induce* that state in the speaker. What might seem to us an insignificant slip into hexameter verse, might to the Greeks have seemed a mark of incipient inspiration. That may not be an entirely mad idea, since the regularized breathing (pneuma) required in chanting hexameter lines may help induce a state of concentration and heightened consciousness.

Be that as it may, the link between inspiration and breath is a strong one both among the Greeks and the Romans (from whose word for *breath* we derive "inspiration.)" That can be seen in the frequent use of words (such as epipnoia and epipneō, *breathe*) when speaking of states of heightened consciousness. For us that word has lost most of its metaphorical tie to the physical act of breathing; instead inspiration is now commonly associated with light imagery, as in "a flash of insight," "a bright idea," or through MRIs showing the lighting up of parts of the brain under certain stimuli. For the Pythia, however, seated close to her Apollo and chanting hexameters, breath metaphors may be more revealing.

Summing Up: So, in at least some ancient Greek settings the hexameter was a meter for conveying inspiration. That was surely the case at Delphi, but even the long epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* begin with prayers for inspiration from a female divinity. Inspiration among the Greeks, however, can surprise us in two ways. It's not simply the dawning of a bright idea or a sudden spurt of insight, as

we often assume. For them it is a process which involves both male and female patterns of thought – Muses inspiring a male poet, for example, or a Pythia chanting to men who came to consult her. Second, inspired utterances among the Greeks are usually the start of a process not their ending. They are rarely straight-forward or clear-cut, but demand interpretation. Inspiration for them, in other words, is an intricate balance between male and female, and a spoken word and its interpretation.

The Interpretation of Inspired speech:

Among the Greeks inspiration was closely tied to poetry. And the interpretation of hexameter oracles used techniques similar to those used in reading other poetry. The Pythia's hexameter oracles, as we have seen, were rarely straightforward, more like a riddle than a prediction. The Athenian delegates who heard Aristonice's words, recognizing their enigmatic quality, wrote them down (Herodotus 7.142.1) and brought them back to Athens for discussion in the citizens' assembly. That transformed oral performance into text and moved words from the sacred setting inside the temple of a god into the open–air hurly-burly of an all-male assembly. There, any part of such texts might be dissected, with each component subjected to relentless scrutiny.

In democratic Athens any debate could be rough and tumble, but arguments about oracles could be especially contentious. There were, to be sure, self-proclaimed oracle-experts and diviners, but, as Plato's leading character in the *Euthyphro* found out, they could be laughed off the speaker's platform when a more appealing interpretation was offered. There were no established protocols defining which considerations were considered appropriate, and which were to be ruled out of order. Proof was impossible; evidence hard to gather and apply. So Plausibility reigned.

Yet, behind such debate two habits of Greek life can be seen at work, solving riddles, and the search for hidden meanings. The two go hand in hand, with metaphor always nearby as helper. The techniques that any alert reader uses in reading poetry found their way into the assembly — taking word and images seriously, being wary of surface meanings, and staying alert to ambiguities and multivalence. These techniques were well-honed in a culture where poetry had a central role in society. In its many forms it was enjoyed,

memorized, and sung by all, males and females, young and old. Riddles and puzzling maxims were no less prominent. They were not child's play but the daily nutrients of adult thinking and entertainment. All these forms came together in intensified form in symposia. When day gave way to night, and the wine flowed freely, Athenian men,, drunk or sober, would tell tales, sing songs and argue about their meaning, at least until the flute-girls arrived. When the assembly turned to interpreting an oracle, especially in time of crisis, the citizens were ready for debate about their meaning. That's how they solved the riddle of the "wooden wall," and figured out what it meant that Salamis was called "godly." Could such a process really work? But, wait: an objection needs first to be heard.

"Could a Woman, Possibly Illiterate, in a Small, Remote Mountain Town Master the craft of Writing Hexameters?"

The question sounds prejudicial, even sexist. After all a century before Aristonice, Sappho had composed poems of unsurpassed power. But she is not an isolated case. More and more women poets keep coming to our attention, writing in many genres, lyrics such as those of Sappho, epigrams preserved I the Greek anthology, and hymns. Hexameter oracles, such as those by Aristonice and other Pythias, belong among these genres (Connor 2019). Many of them hold their own with male poets. Corinna, for example, is said to have defeated Pindar in a poetry contest. In more homely settings, too, women would often sing – there were songs for when one ground grain, wove fabric and probably for many other chores which women performed. Step inside a temple on a festival day and you would be likely to hear a hymn, probably in hexameters, quite possibly sung by the divinity's priestess. When someone died, women would likely perform a ritual lament, antiphonal songs so intense that Greek cities sometimes found it necessary to place restrictions on their lamentations. In all this we can recognize signs of a "women's song culture in ancient Greece," (Maurizio 2017), or, indeed, a culture that valued poetic performances by women no less than those by men.

At Delphi, as we have seen, Pythias were said to have composed hexameters from earliest days. But how would a Pythia learn to compose such verse? Fortunately, classical scholars over the last few generations have pointed the way to an answer. We now know how hexameters were composed in early Greece. Hexameter poems, such as those attributed to Homer and Hesiod, are

derived from traditions of oral composition. To be sure, eventually these poems were written down, but that came late in the process, not at its beginning. Something similar, we can now see, lay behind the hexameter oracles of the Pythia, and it did not depend on writing.

Oral Composition:

Bards who composed their works not by memorizing a text but by composing during a performance could still be found in Crete, mainland Greece and the Balkans well into the twentieth century.. They did this by sing a repertoire of formulae. That term is an indispensable technical tool borrowed from the study of Homer and other poems that derive from a tradition of oral composition. By "formula" I mean a cluster of words that can be repeatedly used in the same metrical situation to express a similar idea. The very beginning of Aristonice's first oracle provides a good illustration. When she chants "Oh, wretched ones," she is using a metrical unit within the hexameter (a dactyl plus a long syllable (long, short, short, long) capable of being used in other situations, but regularly at the beginning of a verse. Such formulae occur with great frequency in Homer and Hesiod. They are very useful to oral poets, who perform their poems not by reading or memorizing a script but by composing them on the spot. Formulae allowed them in performance to craft verse without going back to revise a line. So they help move their poems steadily forward. They are often so useful that in long oral poems or texts adapted from such performances formulae often recur, as for example, polymētis Odysseus ("very wily Odysseus") in the *Odyssey*. Such recurrences are tell-tale signs of oral composition.

As early as the 1960s scholars such as Wallace MacLeod (1961) recognized that hexameter oracles from Delphi were highly formulaic in the sense just described. It's a good guess then that they were composed orally. This is not to suggest that oral composition was easy. On the contrary, it is a craft that demanded both mastery of a repertoire of formulae and a highly focused frame of mind. Since it is, typically, passed down from generation to generation, it is likely that older Pythias trained their younger successors in the craft.

The central question is not, then, whether or how a woman could compose such verse, but how the demands of mastering this demanding craft could coexist with inspiration.

Craft and Inspiration with Aristotle as Guide:

Analogy may be the best way to understand the relationship between craft and inspiration. In making this comparison we are fortunate to have Aristotle as our guide. and rhetoric as the craft to be compared to the prophet's craft (he mantikē technē.). Since inspiration might be recognized by heightened flow of speech (euroia), there is a natural affinity between these two crafts.

Aristotle recognized the link between inspiration (enthousiasmos) and rhetorical power when in his *Rhetoric* he discusses compound words, foreign phrases and hyperbolic expressions. These a good orator would normally avoid, but can be acceptable in some circumstances, for example "*when he has gripped his audience and filled it with enthusiasm...[F]or such is the language of enthusiastic orators, and it is clear that the hearers accept what they say in a sympathetic spirit*" (*Rhetoric* 3.7.11, 1406 b 10, tr. Frese). Good public speakers will recognize what Aristotle has in mind, the rush that comes over a speaker when he is himself filled with emotion and finds his audience carried away as well. This may seem a deviation from Aristotle's preference for the middle road rather than any extreme, but he recognizes the persuasive power of such "enthusiasm." It is, indeed, contagious as Plato also recognized:

> *... the Muse inspires men (entheous ... poiei) herself, and then by means of these inspired persons (ton entheon) the inspiration spreads to others (enthousiazonton) , and holds them in a connected chain. (*Plato *Ion* 533 e, trans. W.R.M. Lamb)

When English borrowed "enthusiasm" from the Greek (enthousiasmos), it left behind the ancient etymology. The Greek term is a compound of the word en (meaning *in*) and theos (*god*). To be "enthusiastic," then, is to experience something divine within one self, or, just possibly, to feel absorbed into the divine. It is a state far from every-day consciousness but, as Aristotle saw, not incompatible with using a craft (technē.). After all, human beings received their crafts from gods, most famously Prometheus. In Greece *enthusiasm* and *technology* can go hand in hand.

The prophet's craft is thus similar to the orator's, in its ability to fuse together more than ordinary excitement and verbal fluency. This fluency may, however, require a "letting go," a temporary step away from self-consciousness

and an acceptance of what is out of one's conscious control. As Peter Struck (2016) has pointed out, that is what Aristotle seems to have had in mind, when commenting on prophecy in the *Eudemian Ethics.* Those who prophesy, he says, are "enthused," but he goes on to note that the mental activity in prophecy is not "in the hands of" the prophet. Here Aristotle chooses not a usual term for *control*. Instead, he adopts an idiom closer to English "in someone's hands" or "up to them." He writes:

> ... *in the case of persons who are enthused and utter prophecies, although they perform an act of thought, nevertheless we deny that saying what they said and doing what they did was up to them ... [C]ertain thoughts and certain affections are not in their hands. (*Aristotle *Eudemian Ethics* 1225 a27-31).

Aristotle does not say that in such a setting these thoughts and affections are in the hands of some divinity, but he does suggest that a well-trained orator or a prophet or prophetess is not always best served by strict self-control, or conscious attention to the rules of his or her craft. It may be better sometimes to step back, and let things flow. Plato might call this a kind of mania, but that term can simply refer to a state of heightened consciousness and insight. It is, moreover, a term consistent with the practice of a craft, a technē.

Rhetoric and prophecy are not, to be sure, alike in all respects. From the listener's point of view the two are quite distinct. The orator normally provides a narrative and explicit arguments to support a specific course of action. There is no separate stage of interpretation. Prophecy rarely works in this way; instead, its language may be highly imagistic and puzzling and the path to be followed left obscure. Orators are usually too straight-forward to make much use of riddles; prophets, on the other hand, seem to delight in provoking the question, "How could that possibly be?" The answer may require an imaginative leap. The reward can be a reframing of earlier assumptions and the stretching of the mind into awareness of hitherto neglected possibilities.

That is, perhaps, as close as we can come at this remove to understanding how the Pythia prophesied, but as we have seen, while the hexameter is a meter well suited to inspired speech, it does not ask for uncritical acceptance. That is not the way Greek claims of inspiration work. Just the opposite: the language of

inspiration signals that meaning will not always be on the surface, and that careful interpretation is essential. For inspiration in all its varied forms among the Greeks was not a one-way street, a pronouncement from on high, demanding assent and unquestioning acceptance. It was rather as we have seen, a challenge to look beyond the obvious and detect what might otherwise be overlooked.

Did Consulting Delphi Work?

The Greeks, like the rest of us, made mistakes, got tricked, taken in by frauds or charlatans. They knew that Pythias had sometimes been corrupted, that Apollo's voice could be muffled by its fallible human recipient. Some dismissed divination altogether, as Jocasta does in the *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Plato knew that prophecy could be regarded as a kind of mania, but was quick to point out:

> *Now then, the greatest of all good things come to us through mania, which is given, moreover, by divine generosity. For both the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona have achieved for Greece many fine benefits both public and private when they are in a state of mania, but few if any when they are "in their right minds*." (Plato Phaedrus 244 a).

Plato was not the only one to think along these lines. Time and time again Greeks made the rough, often perilous journey to Delphi, waited for their turn to consult the Pythia, then, returned home to interpret what were often enigmatic responses. Wily Greeks undertook this slow process even when events were moving rapidly and delay might reduce the chances of success. Then, after all was said and done, they sent dedications to attest their gratitude.

Whatever *we* think, most Greeks seem to have believed that divination as practiced at Delphi produced good results. But Greeks were, I believe, alert to the conditions under which this was true. Inspiration had to be understood in distinctively Greek terms, that is, the mode of thought they evoked was only fully effective when combined with careful exegesis and a sharp strategic sense.

What Herodotus tells about the lead up to the battle of Salamis is one instance of this recurring pattern. To be sure, not all Greek strategic decisions were made in this way. The Persian invasion was, after all, an unprecedented challenge and the victory of all victories for Greece. The battle of Salamis like the process leading up to it had few parallels. Yet among the Greeks very few major

policies were turned into action without some form of divination. Delphi was the heart of this divinatory culture. So, when the question returns, "How could consulting Delphi help?" the response must include both the prophecy and its interpretation.

Delphic prophecies did not provide secret information or specific strategic guidance. Nor did they promise that Zeus and his fellow Olympians would intervene. Nor did the Pythia predict the future in the usual sense of those words. She did, however, set in motion a process that for at least two reasons seems often to have worked, even though it was slow and often enigmatic. In fact, precisely these two features of Delphic prophecy, the ones that may seem most counter-productive to us, account for much of the achievement.

First, "slow thinking." Divination was a time-consuming road to better decision making. While delegates made the long journey, completed the ritual preliminaries, and returned with a response, decision making was put on hold. Hot heads had time to cool and fresh ideas time to emerge. Consultation provided a time out – no rushing ahead to conclusions until the consultation was completed. And when the delegates returned the process was still a slow one, for interpreting what had been brought back from the shrine meant turning an enigmatic text over until its complexities and those of a political and military situation were simultaneously untangled. Slow thinking is the opposite of the all-too-familiar rush to judgment, and the fleet-footed decisiveness of an up or down vote.

Second, "functional obscurity." When the Pythia's response came back, it often sounded like a riddle. Precisely! Among the Greeks riddles were not child's play, but a challenge to the adult imagination. Riddles might sound hopelessly obscure, but over time people learn how to solve them. The solution often turns on identifying ambiguities and recognizing metaphors, then considering every possible meaning. Pythian prophecies can work in a similar way, deawing attention to every possibility. They embody "functional obscurity," that is, their lack of surface clarity can alert the mind to hitherto unrecognized alternatives. They can, thereby, be frame-changers, forcing one to abandon old assumptions and frame the issue in new terms. That is what happened, we can see, when Themistocles turned the enigmatic obscurity of Aristonice's oracle into the

recognition that Athens might, after all, be able to defeat the Persians. By focusing on the puzzling image of a wooden wall, and the troublesome adjective "divine" as an epithet for Salamis he reframed the debate and showed the way to victory. The very things, then, that might seem most problematic about consulting Delphi – the delay, the riddling response, the effort required to interpret a difficult, poetic text - were what helped most in achieving survival and success.

The effectiveness of consulting the Pythia at Delphi depended, then, on a bicameral and gendered process, the inspired but enigmatic pronouncement of the Pythia, followed by an intense interpretive contestation back home. The first of these, expressed by a woman, reflected one mode of thought, poetic, imagistic, associative. They would recognize it as inspired, or enthousiasmos. "Intuitive," we might prefer to call it; the second mode, taking place primarily in an all-male assembly, required something quite unlike business as usual, a willingness to move from one set of assumptions to the imagining of new strategic possibilities. Neither mode of thought would succeed without the other.

Summing up:

There's no formula or set of rules for solving riddles, reading poetry or interpreting oracles, but a certain mind-set helps, a willingness to look below the surface to find hidden meanings. That habit can be transferred from a purely verbal setting to life-or-death decision making. . Previous certainties give way to overlooked possibilities. That, I believe, is what happened as the Athenians struggled over Aristonice's oracles: They started out, it seems, considering two choices, capitulating to Xerxes or fleeing to some other country. Either, Herodotus points out, would have sunk the chances of a Greek victory. The oracle brought back from Delphi led to a discussion that brought into focus other possibilities, including, ultimately, the winning strategy of engaging the Persian fleet off the island of Salamis. Furthermore, Athenian morale turned from discouragement to confidence that they might, after all, find a way to preserve their freedom. And as that change in mood took hold so did their sense of Athens' role. This city became ready to take on the leadership of the Greek resistance. It was no longer out to save its own hide, but rather, in the imagery of Aristonice's first oracle, ready to be the "head" of a Hellenic body politic.

At the end of the process a tough minded sense of the feasible was needed. The process of seeking and interpreting an oracle, in other words, combined "intuition" and "critical thinking." Greeks of the classical period would not use those terms, but they took such a combination in stride. Their concern was not to identify a psychotropic agent to explain the Pythia's state of mind. They thought instead about the whole process of consultation, not least the struggle to interpret what the oracle had said. They were, after all, part of a culture that challenged itself with ambiguities and riddles, that loved paradox, treasured the allusive and elusive, wrestled joyously with symbols, and thought poetry needed no apology. Having abandoned so much of that, we find it difficult to imagine, let alone replicate, the ability to move across a spectrum of cognitive states, valuing each, integrating them into well-crafted decisions. Instead we often construct a barrier vocabulary of abnormality, one that narrows understanding into a single, imperious mode of thought.

That's *our* problem; it wasn't theirs.

III. Aftermath

After Herodotus' account of Salamis Aristonice is never mentioned again in ancient literature. Themistocles eclipses her; he is the hero, later the traitor, and later still the adulated model for savvy politicians. At every turn she slips away like a forgotten high school sweetheart. Reading carefully we can, however, catch a few fleeting glimpses of what happened to her after the Athenian consultation.

When a division of the Persian army was sweeping toward Delphi, the people of the town

> *... were very much afraid, and in their great fear they inquired of the oracle whether they should bury the sacred treasure in the ground or take it away to another country. The god told them to move nothing, saying that he was able to protect what belonged to him. (*Herodotus 8. 36.1, tr. Godley).

That is, the people of Delphi consulted the oracle and received the reply to save themselves and not worry about the rich dedications in the sanctuary. The Pythia who spoke for Apollo was most likely still Aristonice, but when all the women and children were evacuated across the Corinthian gulf, sixty men and a male prophet (Herodotus 8.36.2 f.), named Akēratos, stayed behind. He was probably a

temporary *locum tenens* for Aristonice, performing the Pythia's ritual duties while the women were away, perhaps hoping that the Persians might be willing to reach some accommodation with them.

Amazingly, something even better happened. The Persian force when they were in sight of the sanctuary suddenly withdrew. The high command may have had other needs for these troops, but, of course, the Delphians saw the withdrawal as the work of Apollo and the gods, and a validation of the Pythia's advice. The god had indeed taken care of his own.

Still, it would not have been safe for the women and children to return to Delphi until after the decisive land battle at Plataea in Boeotia (479 BCE). That means that, rather than Aristonice, Akēratos delivered the oracles that Plutarch reports were given in the lead-up to the battle. Certainly they are of a very different style, never in hexameters, and rarely riddling. One sounds like a shopping list, a compilation of divinities who needed to be induced to support the war effort. Olympian gods were invoked, as well as lesser divinities venerated in the area of Plataea. Plutarch reports:

> *Aristides sent to Delphi and received from the god the response that the Athenians would be superior to their foes if they made vows to Zeus, Cithaeronian Hera, Pan, and the Sphragitic nymphs; paid sacrifices to the heroes Androcrates, Leucon, Pisandrus, Damocrates, Hypsion, Actaeon, and Polyidu**s**. (*Plutarch *Aristides* 11.3).

After the defeat of the Persian army at Plataea the women and children could return to Delphi, and, Aristonice could resume her role as the Pythia. If so, she was there when the Greeks who had fought together at Salamis, - "the Hellenes" as they styled themselves – dedicated as a thank offering, the spectacular Apollo Salaminios. It dominated the skyline of the sanctuary. (A reconstruction can be seen in Scott (2014) fig. 1.3, p. 16.) No one claimed the god had directly intervened in the battle itself; they were grateful because his oracles, given in the temple directly opposite the statue, had led to the victorious strategy. Aristonice must have been pleased to have her oracles implicitly recognized in this way, even if her name was not mentioned.

In another inquiry the Athenians asked about a serpent (drakōn) that was said to have come to their aid when they were fighting the Persians at sea. The

Pythia identified the sea serpent as Cychreus, a hero venerated on Salamis, and validated the establishment of a shrine in his honor, not, however, on Salamis, but in Athens itself. This helped consolidate Athens' ritual primacy in the Saronic Gulf. (Cychreus' sanctuary in Athens seems still to be functioning in the second century of our era when Pausanias saw it (Pausanias 1.36.1)).

In another story Themistocles and the Pythia met face to face. Themistocles arrived at Delphi, bringing with him booty from the Salamis victory, and announcing he would like to set it up inside the temple as a dedication to Apollo (Pausanias 10.14.5). On the surface it was a reasonable, even pious request, but the Pythia, probably Aristonice, would have none of it. She saw right through his scheme. If the booty were a dedication of the Athenians, it should go into the Athenian treasury, which enjoyed a prominent enough position on the Sacred Way. But Themistocles wanted to make an offering in his own name, and his name would, no doubt, be prominent upon it. The Pythia told him to take it all away, not just out of the temple but out of the entire sanctuary (to hieron). This story may be a legend but Pausanias the traveler saw her response inscribed at Delphi in hexameter verses:

The splendid beauty of the Persian spoils

Set not within my temple. Send them home forthwith. *(*Pausanias 10.14.5)

It's another riddle. Where is this "home" of these spoils – Athens or Persia? Themistocles was from Athens but the spoils were from Persia, and it was to Persia that Themistocles, turned traitor, would go when things went badly for him in Athens.

There were many other Delphic oracles in the years around the Persian War, but none is specifically ascribed to Aristonice. Michael Flower, ((2008), pp.235 f.) however, is probably right in pointing out that another Delphic oracle given to Sparta at about this time is likely to have come from Aristonice, as are others given at this time to Athens and Argos. There is, however, no need to speculate about Aristonice's continuing activity. She had rendered the great service to her country at the moment when it was most desperately needed. We too owe her a debt of gratitude, for thanks to her prophecies we can better understand a pattern of thought deeply rooted in Greek soil. Perhaps, too, our slumbering capacities for peripheral vision and intuitive thinking may be

awakened by her story. She must now be allowed to exit the stage of Greek history and step into a well-deserved retirement.

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