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Body As Battleground: Feminine Prophecy and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean

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**Body as Battleground:
Feminine Prophecy and Identity in the Ancient
Mediterranean**

Honors Project

Classics

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Submitted May 3, 2010

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Introduction: Entirely the God's Possession

One week at synagogue—I must have been eleven or twelve—one of my religious school classmates asked our rabbi how the biblical prophets spoke with God. It was a simple enough question, and knowing what I now know about ancient conceptions of prophecy and divinity, I am sure that even if his answer had satisfied me then, it wouldn't necessarily satisfy me now. As it was, however, all of us eleven and twelve year olds in the class were less than thrilled with the response. He stumbled through a few different explanations for a minute or two, using words like “chosen,” “called,” and “inspired.” Finally, when he saw we had mostly lost interest, he dismissed the question with a wave of his hand saying, “Well, they were all hopped up on *something*.”

My former rabbi's comment was intended to calm a group of garrulous adolescents. He wasn't attempting to enlighten us or engage us in a scholarly discussion, but still, I can't help but wonder if he actually believed what he said. Some modern conceptions of prophecy revolve around the use of hallucinogens and other drugs. Others involve the interpretation of signs and portents, or the reading of obscure texts. Outside the realm of academic discourse, however, the world seems to spare little thought for the idea of prophecy itself. Many are happy, just like my rabbi, to dismiss the entire phenomenon as “drug induced,” or consider it a vaguely interesting remnant of ancient religious traditions.

Prophecy, I believe, deserves a closer look. Texts that deal with prophecy provide a unique framework for examining the world because they focus on an individual

attempting to contain and control two identities at once—their own identity, and a divine identity. I have endeavored to study these identities and how they present themselves within the body of a prophetess. My research focuses on women because I am greatly interested in questions of sexuality and gender as they arise in texts of the ancient Mediterranean, and the intersection of prophecy and gender has proven a rich and vivid source of answers (or at least, more specific questions). Furthermore, what I define as prophecy only occurs beyond doubt in and upon human beings who are women themselves or men whose bodies are feminized. Genders and gendered roles become blurred when prophetesses and prophets are involved. This is an aspect of the experience that holds true for all the prophetesses this paper examines. In addition, these feminine bodies become battlegrounds for the identities that dwell within them.

What, then, is prophecy? Early on in my research, I realized that I needed to divest myself of all preconceptions that conflated prophecy with oracles, portents, signs, and fortune-telling. All these things, to some extent, *do* occur under the broad prophetic umbrella, but the meaning of the word itself requires a reconsidered definition. To prophesy, from the Greek προφητεύειν/*propheteuein*, to literally “speak before” something, is an act that requires the presence of two beings—one to speak, and one to be spoken for. The speech is the φάτις/*fatis*, a Greek term meaning, most basically, that which is spoken—but also an oracle, a voice from heaven, a reputation, or a report.¹ The φάτις/*fatis* is spoken before, or “προ/*pro*” someone else—but προ means “in place

¹ Henry George Lidell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1996), 1919.

of” in addition to “in front of.”² From these two terms comes the word *προφητεύω/propheteuo*—to speak in front of, to speak on behalf of, to prophesy. A person completing this act places herself simultaneously in front of and in the place of someone else.

From this notion arises the idea of being inhabited by a deity. The Greeks termed this state of bodily inspiration “ἐνθουσιάζω/*enthousiasmos*,” literally “in-god-ness,” the inhabitation of a god. The usage of this term implies the physical presence of a god (θεός), which takes place “inside”—“ἐν.” The “inside” in this case is the body of the prophetess. Prophecy is a physical experience. It happens upon and within the body. Both divine and human identities are contained within the prophetess’ body—and because they both inhabit the same space, the prophetess’ body becomes a contested space, a battleground. The battle waged is not just for control of the body, or even the life of the prophetess—it is for her very identity, and its right to exist unencumbered in her body.

This can be further clarified with an article by Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others.” She says that someone speaking on behalf of another “loses some portion of his or her control over the meaning and truth of his or her utterance.”³ Her model presents the problems of location and power dynamics when one person speaks “for” or “on behalf of” another person. The speaker, regardless of location or intention, assumes a type of authority over the person he or she is speaking for. In the case of prophetesses as represented in ancient texts who speak through the influence of divinity, I

² Liddell, 1465.

³ Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” (*Cultural Critique*, No. 20, Minneapolis, the University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 5-32.

propose the opposite. Alcoff argues for care lest the identity of the one spoken for becomes lost. I suggest that, when the original power behind the words—that is, the “inspiration,” is more than human, the speaker’s identity is the one in trouble. Though it is the divine realm we are dealing with, the experience manifests itself upon the body.

If an individual identity is to survive the subsumption that takes place, it must manifest itself in the prophetic speech. Iamblichus, a philosopher from the Hellenistic period, writes, “When [the prophetess] is installed on the god’s throne, she is in harmony with his enduring divinatory power. And in consequence...she becomes entirely the god’s possession.”⁴ In order to maintain the identity necessary for continuing as both a human and a prophetess, a struggle occurs, visible both in the words the prophetess speaks and in the bodily nature of the prophecy itself. The prophetess places her own identity into her prophecy, and subsequently the god she speaks for becomes not only the one she speaks “in front of,” but also becomes herself. The prophetic utterance transforms into an outpouring of identity, representative of the battle happening within the prophetess’ body.

The very language of coporeality has found its way into our modern prophetic vocabulary. “Inspiration,” for example, comes from the Latin *inspiro*, meaning literally to “breathe into.” *Inspiro*, as well as its Greek counterpart, is often used as a sexual metaphor. When a god breathes upon or into someone, the presence of breath implies the sexual act.⁵ Even our usage of the word “enthusiasm,” with its definition containing the idea of a deity’s physical inhabitation, carries bodies within its range of meaning. These

⁴ Giulia Sissa. *Greek Virginity*. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990), 10-11. Sissa is here quoting Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* III.1.1.

⁵ See, for example, Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*, 18.

concepts are inextricably linked. The body is underscored even in the physical moment of prophecy. Every prophetess engages her body in some way—she dances, she moves, she sits upon a throne—that is integral to her performance of the prophetic act.

Notions of the body, therefore, have found their way into my definition of a prophetess. This is the first hurdle to a study like this—how exactly should a prophetess be defined? A common way to conduct similar research is to focus on literature in which the word “prophetess” appears. I have chosen to depart slightly from this—in the same way that not all who teach are called teachers, not every woman who prophesies is called a prophetess. Instead, I have chosen to use the literal definition that the word “prophetess” itself provides, and build upwards. As was stated before, a prophetess is one who speaks in front of/for/on behalf of another—and instead of a traditional human other, the prophetesses’ other is divinity itself. In the texts that I will be studying, there is some indicator, either through the appellation “prophetess,” or another marker, that the female is speaking under divine influence.

The distinction may seem narrow, but the implications are many. Using this definition, women who are not traditionally thought of as prophetesses are allowed to become them. The scope is slightly widened, and an arc of prophetesses begins to form, with parts visible in ancient Israelite religion and Judaism, archaic and classical Greek religious traditions, Hellenistic literature, and even Roman state religion. Christian and Gnostic traditions also dip into the wells of prophetesses, especially when the virgin Mary is considered as one who not only speaks under the inspiration of divinity, but has a relationship that could conventionally be defined as sexual with her god as well. This

writing, however, will focus in the first stretch of the arc on the prophetesses in the Hebrew bible and Classical Greek tradition.

I begin with three women from the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible. Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah are all identified with the word “prophetess,” as well as through their ability to speak for YHVH. Miriam, sister of Moses, sings an inspired song to YHVH after crossing the Red Sea. Deborah and Huldah both pronounce oracles, and Deborah participates in a military victory, engaging with secular authority as Huldah also blurs the line between genders, validating a religious text with divine authority.

Many women in the Greek-speaking world participated in some sort of prophetic rite, but I have focused my study on the three who are most prevalent in literature and myth. The Pythia, Apollo’s prophetess at Delphi, is the focus of my fourth chapter. Her prophecies are contained in a vast corpus, but do not exist in one work of literature like the stories of the biblical prophetesses. This holds true for all the Greek prophetesses—in the next chapter concerning Cassandra, I examine both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. Finally, I turn to the Sibyl, a prophetess existent in many cultures across the ancient Mediterranean, and the one whose words first prompted this study.

A word must be spoken about the phenomenon of masculine prophecy in this context. Masculine prophecy in the ancient Mediterranean world was very different from “feminine” prophecy. In the Greek and Roman world, males interpreting the will of the gods were most often diviners and augurs, not oracles and mantic prophets. Priests at various oracular sites other than Delphi could certainly read and interpret the messages

that were sent, much in the same way that the Pythia's *hosioi* did,⁶ but they were not in the habit of giving oracles themselves. The oracle of Zeus at Dodona, for example, was interpreted through the drawing of lots made from the sacred oak⁷. Other oracles operated similarly, and in Roman times, the positions of *augur* and *haruspex* actually became government offices, held by men.⁸

When male prophets did speak through direct inspiration and *enthousiasmos*, it was done in such a way that the male prophet's body was feminized to a point where it also became a battleground. This is a subject much too complex to be covered in a short section of this paper, but it does need to be outlined. Three figures rise to the front of this discussion: Teiresias, the blind prophet, Hesiod, and Moses.

The narrator in Hesiod's *Theogony* receives his inspiration from the Muses. Even though he does not identify himself as a prophet—he is a poet—the line is thin here, and all other things aside, he is inspired by divinity. As a male speaking with the voice of female deities, he reenacts conversely the Pythia's communion with Apollo. The source of inspiration still lies within an ancient notion of the person as only conduit through which the non-physical can enter a body. Hesiod feminizes himself in order to receive the Muses' inspiration. According to his song, they call him a *gaster*, a womb.⁹

⁶ The *hosioi* were the male cult officials at Delphi. They were the interpreters of the Pythia's utterance. Fontenrose, 466.

⁷ Steven M. Oberhelman, "Dodona," in *Encyclopedia of Greece and the Hellenic Tradition* ed. Graham Speake (Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000) 508.

⁸ J. Linderski, "Augures," "Haruspices," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, third edition, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁹ Γαστήρ has a huge range of semantic meanings. It refers to the space in the human body that exists between the groin and the breast, and can be either the stomach, the

αἴ νύ ποθ' Ἡσίοδον καλὴν ἐδίδαξαν ἀοιδὴν,
ἄρνας ποιμαίνονθ' Ἐλικῶνος ὑπο ζαθέοιο.
τόνδε δέ με πρώτιστα θεαὶ πρὸς μῦθον ἔειπον,
Μοῦσαι Ὀλυμπιάδες, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο:
ποιμένες ἄγραυλοι, κάκ' ἐλέγχεα, γαστέρες οἶον,
ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,
ἴδμεν δ', εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι.
(Hesiod, *Theogony*, 22-28).

Hesiod is saying:

And then one day they taught Hesiod a beautiful song
as he was shepherding sheep under Holy Helicon.
And the first word the goddesses spoke before me,
Olympian Muses, maidens of aegis-bearing Zeus,
“Shepherds lying in the field, stupid with shame, only wombs—
we know how to speak much that is false as if they weren’t
and we know when we might wish to pronounce truth.”

The Muses teach Hesiod by implanting knowledge and inspiration within him—in his “womb.” In the next few lines, we read that they do so by breathing (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 30). Breath and breathing is a common metaphor for divine impregnation—Io, for example, is impregnated by Zeus’ breath in *The Suppliant Women* (Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*, 18). The source of Hesiod’s divine speech is his highly metaphorical, and yet still physical, act of communion with a set of goddesses. His masculine body becomes feminine in order for this to occur, and the ultimate masculinity, that of Zeus, stands behind the Muses as they inspire.

Teiresias, the prophet best known from appearances in the *Odyssey* and Sophocles’ *Theban Trilogy*, also turns his body into a vessel for prophecy. The nature of his prophecy is contested by various sources. Some claim that he speaks oracles while others maintain that his ability to understand birdsong was the source of his otherworldly

womb, or any other part of that bodily cavity. In this case, however, it is clear that Hesiod is using imagery of impregnation.

knowledge.¹⁰ Thirteen out of eighteen ancient sources give an account of a story in which Teiresias spends time as both a man and a woman, either as a gift or punishment from the gods.¹¹ As a result, the metaphor of body as battleground becomes slightly more than a metaphor. Zeus and Hera are actually fighting over his physical vessel. The experiences of Teiresias as both as a man and as a woman are a large part of what gives him his gift of sight.

It is perhaps perfectly fitting that one of our best sources from Teiresias comes from a Roman freedman who claims to be paraphrasing Hesiod.¹² I am less concerned with the technical details of Teirisiyas' story. What fascinates me more is that, in most stories, it seems that prophecy only came to him after spending time as a woman. In Phlegon of Tralles' account of Hesiod's version, Teiresias receives his first oracle from Apollo while still a woman. "He went from being a man to being a woman, and had intercourse with a man. Apollo informed him in an oracle that if he observed..."¹³ It is the act of feminization, and perhaps even femininity itself, that allows a human body to be opened up to the act of prophecy. Hesiod understands this and has trouble with it, and uses the Muses as a convenient sexual buffer between himself and Zeus. Teiresias has this forced upon him, but because of it, gains the gift of prophecy.

The male prophets of the Jewish tradition also participate in this "necessary feminization," allowing their bodies to become feminine enough to accept prophecy.

¹⁰ "Tiresias," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 1530.

¹¹ Luc Brisson, *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*. Translated by Janet Lloyd (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002), 116.

¹² Brisson, 117.

¹³ Phlegon, cited by Brisson, 117.

Daniel Boyarin points out several times in *A Radical Jew*, his book on Saint Paul, that circumcision is in part an act that also prepares a Jewish male for seeing and speaking to YHVH.¹⁴ This is because circumcision, as an act of feminization, prepares a man for the sexual reception of a masculine God¹⁵. Prophecy is made possible by an act that, again, emphasizes its inherently physical nature.

Moses highlights this. When he speaks to YHVH after failing to rally the Israelites behind him, he describes himself as having “uncircumcised lips” (Ex. 6:12). This emphasizes the connection between the mouth and the sexual organs that is necessary for prophecy. Eventually, Moses does succeed in convincing Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, and he even succeeds in calling the Israelites into action behind him. Much is made of the circumcision that allows Moses to become a receptacle of YHVH’s prophecy—Exodus 4:24-26 recounts the ritual by which Tziporah, Moses’ wife, feminizes him with her knife and allows him to participate in the woman’s prophetic world.

The feminine body, then, is central to the idea of spoken prophecy. Not only does the body have to act as a vessel through which a divinity can speak, but it must also be capable of conceiving prophecy as a passive and receptive sexual act. It is not just any body, then, that becomes important—it is the woman’s body, a feminine body, that allows prophecy to happen. Spoken prophecy is a uniquely feminine space within the ancient world, and often requires men to undergo an act of feminization before being capable of participating in it.

¹⁴ Boyarin, Daniel. *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 1997: 136.

¹⁵ Eilberg-Schwartz, *Off with her Head*.

Various terms will also continually appear, and I would like to clarify them before moving into the main focus of the paper. Several are closely related, so I would like to explain the nuance that exists within them, and whether I choose to use them or not.

The Hebrew word for a prophetess is נביאה /*n'vi'ah*. This comes from the three-letter root נבא which can mean, at the base level, both “to utter a low sound” and “to be exalted.”¹⁶ Some scholars believe this root to also contain the meaning of “bubbling up,” which complements the idea of physicality and prophecy quite well. The word נביאה /*n'vi'ah* is used to designate all three prophetesses that I discuss from the Hebrew Bible, as well as two other women.¹⁷ These two women, however, never speak—and therefore are not discussed in this study.

Throughout the course of Greek literature, several different words have been used to denote various ideas in the prophetic realm. Προφητεύω/*propheteuo*, as already shown, comes from elements meaning “speak” and “before.”¹⁸ I use the nominal form, προφητεία/*propheteia* (prophecy) both as an umbrella term to describe inspired speech, and to designate the actual prophetic utterance. Προφήτις/*prophetis*, then, is the noun meaning “prophetess.” At least one of these words appears in the text involving each of our Greek prophetesses.

Related, but slightly different, is the word Μαντεία/*manteia*.¹⁹ Most dictionaries also define it as “prophetic power, power of divination,” but because of its relationship to the word μάνια/*mania*, which means “madness,” I have chosen to give

¹⁶ F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 2005), 611.

¹⁷ Cf. Nehemiah 6:14 for Noadiah, Isaiah 8:3 for “the prophetess.”

¹⁸ Liddell, 1919.

¹⁹ Liddell, 1079.

μαντεία/*manteia* a slightly more nuanced translation. I only use it to refer to the actual state of prophesying, but I distinguish it slightly from ἐνθουσιάζω */enthousiasmos*.²⁰ Μαντεία */manteia* is the point of speech, the moment at which both identities are at their most prominent. Ἐνθουσιάζω */enthousiasmos* signifies a slightly longer timeframe—the entire experience of having a deity within the body, and not just the moment of prophetic action.

A word that does not occur in the texts I explore, but still deserves mention, is ἐκστάσις/*ekstasis*. This is commonly translated as “ecstasy,” but literally means “displacement, movement outwards, astonishment.”²¹ It refers to existing outside of the confines of a body—hence “displacement,” but is not a word used in a prophetic context until much later. In the one instance in which it is used for prophecy, the writing is by Plato—a man who did not experience the prophecy in the same way as the women we are discussing.

With this vocabulary and framework, I trace the arc of prophetesses that existed in the ancient Mediterranean. Through an exploration of these women, their stories, and the literature that has allowed them to be received from one generation to the next, I hope to add their voices to the swelling chorus that has begun and continues to rise from beneath the dominant song of history and religion. As they speak, sing, and dance their prophecies, their identities are poured into texts that we have the ability, and perhaps even the responsibility, to study. I will analyze pathways to divinity and forms of

²⁰ Liddell, 655.

²¹ Liddell, 520.

religious experience that have not traditionally been given import as the voice of the prophetess resonates from age to age through the pages of text.

Chapter 1 With Drums and Dancing: Miriam (מרים)

Miriam has found her way into modern Judaism in unexpected ways, appearing at holidays and mentioned in songs that neglect her prophetic past. She is also the subject of a song (written by Debbie Friedman) sung at numerous Jewish camps, which names her a weaver and not a prophetess. Miriam is important as a woman leader in an ever-evolving religion, and even as a modern symbol in Judaism. My purpose is to study her in the context of ancient sacred literature as one of the earliest mentioned prophetesses in the ancient Israelite world.

Miriam appears by name at seven different points in the *Tanakh*.²² In the first of these she is identified as “Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron’s sister,”²³ which has led many to believe that she is also the nameless sister of Moses in Exodus 2:4-10.²⁴ Some scholars believe biblical Miriam is actually a redactor’s composite of several different women, since Miriam is not mentioned as both a prophetess and the sister of both Moses and Aaron (or even their sister at all) in each textual occurrence.²⁵ I believe that these

²² Exodus 15:20-21, Numbers 12:1-15, Numbers 20:1, Numbers 26:59, Deut 24:9, Micah 6:4, and 1 Chr. 5:29. *Tanakh* is the Hebrew term used to denote the Hebrew Bible. It is formed from an acronym of the Hebrew words *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim*, meaning “Teaching,” “Prophets,” and “Writings.” I will use this terminology to refer to the Hebrew Bible.

²³ Exodus 15:20. All translations (in this chapter and all others) are my own unless otherwise noted.

²⁴ David L. Lieber et. al., *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (New York, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001).

²⁵ Wilda Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2008), 80.

women portray a unified entity—Miriam—which is how they survive in the received tradition of the *Tanakh*. Taken together, they create the image of a woman who prophesies with her entire body, existing within both masculine and feminine spheres while still calmly and forcefully asserting her identity.

I will examine most instances in which Miriam is named, leaving the unnamed sister of Exodus 2 for a later project. There has also been much rabbinic speculation and *midrash*²⁶ around this text, linking the unnamed sister and her mother with the two Israelite midwives (Shifrah and Pu'ah) who manage to save countless Israelite firstborn males from death. As interesting as these moments of the putative Miriam's earlier life are, they do not concern her prophetic identity. One can return to these stories after an analysis of Miriam the Prophetess, and see them in a new light—but they do little to inform about the nature of her prophecy.

Miriam is identified as a prophetess the first time we see her name (Ex. 15:20). Some scholars consider this an anachronism, added by a redactor in later stages of the Torah's formation.²⁷ Rita Burns claims that Miriam displays no prophetic activity, never uttering an oracle or speaking to God. I propose that not only is Miriam a prophetess, but that beginning here, we can start to see a paradigm for other prophetesses across the ancient Mediterranean. She is a woman for whom communicating with divinity is a physical experience. As a prophetess and authority figure, Miriam also blurs gender roles, and as will be seen, her body is central to the development of both these concepts.

²⁶ Midrash is a form of Rabbinic biblical exegesis that explains stories with deeper stories, sometimes creating characters, names, and situations.

²⁷ Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A study of the biblical portrait of Miriam* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 1987) 5.

I will focus mainly on Exodus 15:20-21 and Numbers 12:1-12, summarizing the rest of Miriam's appearances in the *Tanakh* afterwards.

From her first mention, Miriam is a woman, a prophetess, and a singer. She is “*Miryam ha-n'vi'ah, achot Aharon,*” Miriam the Prophetess, Sister of Aaron (Ex. 15:20). The framework this identification creates helps the reader engage Miriam on different levels, understanding her essence and identity as primarily feminine and prophetic.

Exodus 15 states:

ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרון את התוף בידה
ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה בתפים ובמחלות:
ותען להם מרים
שירו ליהוה כי גאה גאה
סוס ורכבו רמה בים:

¹And Miriam the prophetess, sister of Aaron, took her drum in her hand.
All the women went out after her with drums and dancing.

²And Miriam called-and-responded with them,
“Sing to YHVH for he has indeed exalted himself
He has cast a horse and his rider into the sea.”
(Exodus

15:20-21)

These two verses of the Torah are commonly cited as one of the oldest literary and poetic strains of the entire *Tanakh*.²⁸ Burns uses them as evidence that Miriam's cult status was long standing in the Israelite community. They are remnants of a well-

²⁸ Burns, 13.

documented tradition of victory song and dance, and possibly even a liturgy in themselves—what Burns calls the service of “the Divine Warrior.”²⁹ Other women of the *Tanakh* lead similar dances, albeit most commonly for mortal victors. As a two-line victory song, these verses, through their length and style, are comparable to several other victory songs in the bible, most of which are identified as being part of the *Tanakh*’s earliest sources.³⁰ In addition, women perform most of these victory songs.³¹

In order to delve more deeply into the traditions surrounding these verses and the facts they can give us on Miriam’s role as a prophetess, a close reading is necessary, starting with Miriam’s name itself. Rabbis have long argued about the source of the name *Mir’yam*. To the reader of ancient Hebrew it looks to be composed of two simple enough words: מר/*Mar*, meaning bitter, and ים/*yam*, meaning ocean. Burns says that this is unlikely, especially given the Egyptian roots of Aaron and Moses’ names. Other alternate translations of “Plump One” or “Wished-for Child” have also not been regarded well.³² It is likely, rather, that Miriam comes from an Egyptian root, as does her brother’s name “Moses.” *Mer* is a common root found in Egyptian personal names, meaning “love.” *Mry r’*, the beloved of Re, can easily become “Miriam” when it crosses over into another language. This is an attractive theory, especially when one considers that contemporary Egyptian priestesses at the time, also known as the *mrt*, from a similar root, participated in cultic dances involving sistrums and other rattles.³³ Through her very

²⁹ Burns, 31.

³⁰ Burns, 15.

³¹ Cf. 2 Samuel, for example.

³² Burns, 9.

³³ Burns, 38

name, Miriam is linked to the tradition of feminine ritual that involves movement, instrumentation, and her body.

What can we see in these two verses, and how can they give us more information about the nature of Miriam's prophecy? The verb that I have chosen to translate as "called-and-responded," (*va-taan*) comes from the Hebrew root ענה (*ayin-nun-heh*), which means, on a basic level, "to answer, respond."³⁴ This verb has a huge range of semantic possibilities, however. Included are meanings such as "to be responsive," "to be amenable," "to grant," "to meet demands," and even "to testify" and "to witness"³⁵. Some scholars have even translated it to mean "to respond in the joy of the heart, to answer to the joy, to be occupied with the joy."³⁶ Its usage, then, suggests something more than just a woman singing a song or shouting out praise. Twenty verses earlier, Moses and the men of Israel "sang" their song—"So Moses, and the Sons of Israel, sang this song to YHVH" (Ex. 15:1). Miriam, on the other hand, "responds." Is she merely responding to Moses' song, or is there a deeper meaning behind the verb?

Based on surrounding context and the many valences of the verb, it is possible to interpret "*va-taan*" (and she called-and-responded) in a performative sense. It is surrounded by action: Miriam first takes up her drum, women go out after her, and dance is used in some fashion. This drum is the ubiquitous timbrel—a percussion instrument of unknown physical characteristics.³⁷ Miriam and the women are participating in a physical ritual together; they are dancing and playing instruments, incorporating their

³⁴ Brown, *Lexicon*, 772.

³⁵ Brown, *Lexicon*, 722.

³⁶ Brown, *Lexicon*, 722.

³⁷ Brown, *Lexicon*, 1074.

whole bodies in the worship of YHVH at this moment. With Miriam leading, her body and presence is central to the inspired nature of the ritual.

The verb form used is a singular, third person feminine form. Because it is a singular and not plural verb, along with the fact that Miriam is explicitly identified, it becomes clear that she was a leader of this process. We have other sources for women singing and chanting at victory dances;³⁸ it follows, therefore, that Miriam and her women are acting in a similar manner. Moses' actions by comparison seem stoic and stiff. He is limited to singing a song, while Miriam, dances, sings, and plays an instrument all at once.

Miriam's next appearance, in Numbers 12, helps to elucidate the difference between *navi* and *n'vi'ah*, prophet and prophetess. It also introduces the importance of prophecy as a bodily experience, not just a physical experience. Other women sing and dance in the Hebrew Bible— only Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah prophesy, and this has everything to do with their bodies. In this text, God speaks directly to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, letting them know that as special as they are, they will never quite compare to Moses. Here is Miriam's story in Numbers 12.³⁹

¹And Miriam spoke, and Aaron, against Moses, on the grounds of the Cushite woman he had taken—for he had taken a Cushite woman.

²And they said, “Has YHVH *only* spoken through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken through us?” And YHVH was listening. ³And the man Moses was very humble, more so than any other man who was on the face of the earth.

⁴And God suddenly said to Moses, to Aaron, and to Miriam, “Go, the three of you, to the Appointed Tent.” And the three of them went.

³⁸ Cf. Judges 11:34, 1 Samuel 18:6. In Judges, Jephthah's daughter dances with a singular verb, while the women of 1 Samuel 18 dance together.

³⁹ I refrain from giving the Hebrew text when it is more than 10 lines long, for technical purposes.

⁵And God descended in a column of cloud, and he stood in the entrance of the tent and called out to Aaron and Miriam. And they went out, the two of them. ⁶And he said, “Please, listen to my words. If there are prophets of YHVH among you, I make myself known to him in a vision; I shall speak to him in a dream. ⁷This is not the way with my servant Moses: he is faithful in all my house. ⁸I shall speak to him mouth to mouth, and apparently, not in riddles. And he looks upon the likeness of YHVH. And why were you not fearful to speak against my servant, Moses? ⁹And the anger of YHVH grew against them, and he left.

¹⁰And the cloud turned from upon the tent, and behold, Miriam was scaly with snow. And Aaron turned to Miriam, and behold, she was humbled with leprosy. ¹¹And Aaron said to Moses, “Do not blame us, my Lord, for the sin we committed in our sinning. ¹²Do not let her be as a dead one in his exit from the womb of his mother, with half his flesh already eaten.” ¹³And Moses cried out to God, saying, “God, please heal her!”

¹⁴And YHVH said to Moses, “If her father should spit right into her face, would she not be shamed for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and afterwards let back in. ¹⁵And Miriam was shut out from the camp for seven days, and the nation did not travel until she was added again.

(Numbers 12:1-15)

The nature of this confrontation is difficult to ascertain. Numbers 12:1 implies that Moses’ marriage to a Cushite woman sparked the contention, but no later mention of her occurs. The complaint that both Aaron and Miriam actually verbalize seems much more personal. They question Moses’ sole prophetic authority, claiming that YHVH has also spoken through them. “And they said, “Has YHVH *only* spoken through Moses? Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” (Num. 12:2).

There are several different forces at play here, all of which can be pulled out to glean a greater understanding of Miriam’s role as a prophetess in the community. Miriam herself is not identified with the word “prophetess” in this passage—but I have chosen to include it because of the way it deals with speaking directly with YHVH.

Scholars generally agree that the controversy is not really about Moses' wife at all.⁴⁰ It is a symbolic fight over oracular, political, lay, or even non-religious authority. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are identified together in other biblical texts,⁴¹ but it is only here that they are identified together *and* in contention with one another. Moses' supremacy is certainly apparent when the bible narrates episodes involving only him, and the relationship between Moses and Aaron is complex enough for another thesis altogether. It is only here, however, that we see all three siblings together, with Moses clearly superior and Aaron and Miriam opposing him.

A beautiful piece of biblical wordplay helps to emphasize the conflict.⁴² In Numbers 12:1, Aaron and Miriam “speak out against Moses”. This idiom in Hebrew is signified by *d-b-r b'-*, the same idiom used for God speaking “through” someone, the same idiom used for inspired prophecy. The prefix “*b-*” contains several meanings, two of which lie beneath this surface. The first, meaning “on” or “against” creates an idiomatic phrase signifying opposition, while the second, using a meaning closer to an instrumental “with⁴³” illuminates Miriam and Aaron as beings YHVH has used, and therefore spoken *through*. Numbers 12:1 makes use of the meaning “to speak out against,” while Numbers 12:2 engages the more prophetic valence, “to speak through.”

⁴⁰ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York, Summit Books, 1987) 76. In fact, Friedman points out that the different mentions of Moses' wives appear in different sources—it is the E source text that gives us the Cushite wife mentioned here, and the J source text that mentions Tziporah. The issue, then, is clearly not one of Moses' infidelity or communal racism.

⁴¹ Micah 6:4, e.g.

⁴² Burns, 71.

⁴³ Brown, *Lexicon*, 88.

Miriam, as well as Aaron, is clearly identified as someone who communes with the divine. In fact, almost as if to emphasize this, YHVH immediately calls both of them into the Tent of Meeting, reprimanding them for speaking out against Moses. The difference, YHVH explains, is not in the fact that they receive divine communication—any prophet can communicate with YHVH in a dream—but rather lies in the *method* of communication. Moses communes with YHVH “mouth to mouth, and apparently, not in riddles.”⁴⁴ Therefore, even though all three maintain a significant position in the community, Moses’ position as a leader above the other two is made concrete.

Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, in his article “An Oral History of Ancient Judaism,” brings attention to a host of varying Israelite attitudes about the dual divine and sexual nature of the mouth. The Babylonian Talmud, a collection of commentary and exegesis on Jewish laws compiled over several hundred years, says, “A woman’s voice is nakedness.”⁴⁵ Eilberg-Schwartz’s argument claims, among other things, that the discomfort that arises to the Israelite consciousness from the inherent sexuality of a woman’s voice creates a reason to silence her. Viewed in this light, Miriam’s fight with Moses becomes less about a personal issue, and more a struggle for her identity. With voice and body intrinsically linked, Miriam must speak out against Moses so that her identity is not subsumed by her brother.

In an article on similar themes, S. David Sperling argues that the conflict between Miriam, Moses, and Aaron, like much of the history of the Israelites wandering in the

⁴⁴ Numbers 12:8

⁴⁵ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “The Nakedness of a Woman’s Voice, the Pleasure in a Man’s Mouth” in *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women’s Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture*, ed Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley, the University of California Press, 1995).

desert, is allegorical. The tale is addressed to a Jewish audience during the Persian period, which he defines as the crucial point in time during which the new idea of the “Torah,” represented by Moses, is in direct competition with ancient traditions of oral law and prophecy.⁴⁶ Sperling’s theory operates on the underlying notion of the Torah’s masculinity. The written word was (to the best of our knowledge) a product of a man’s hand, and a Torah is written by a סופר—*sofer*, or scribe, a community position almost always held by men. Jewish tradition places Moses as the first סופר—*sofer*, equating the act of writing a Torah with Moses’ reception and revelation of it.⁴⁷

With both Aaron and Miriam representing different aspects of the prophetic tradition, the opposition that they bring to Moses spans multiple genders and identities. Immediately we see that a binary is not the correct way to conceive of the conflict in Judaic law—Miriam and Aaron are both on the same side, representing various aspects of a much more nuanced whole.

Miriam suffers for her boldness, and is given “snowy scales of leprosy.” With my consideration of the body as central to a prophetess’ identity, it is then necessary for her punishment to occur on her body.⁴⁸ The fall from purity, as well as its physical representation on her body, denigrates her identity. Aaron claims his priestly identity as

⁴⁶ S. David Sperling, “Miriam, Aaron and Moses: Sibling Rivalry” (Cincinnati, *The Hebrew Union College Annual*, 2000) 70-71.

⁴⁷ Anthony J. Saldarini, “Scribes,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume V* (New York, Doubleday, 1992) 1012.

⁴⁸ The tension between the written law and spoken law becomes important later in this paper, as well. The prophetess Huldah has an interesting interaction with the written word—but unfortunately for her, her brush with such a masculine authority necessitates the erasure of her physicality from the narrative.

he affirms the status of her illness⁴⁹ (Num. 12:10), for it is the priest's (Aaron's) duty to examine a sufferer for *tzara'at* (biblical "leprosy"). As Aaron's status is raised and solidified in Israelite society with this action, represented by his ritual examination of Miriam's condition, Miriam's place as a prophetess is denigrated. This denigration can be seen in a light that opposes the more masculine world of the written Torah.

What makes this story slightly easier to understand in light of Miriam's position as a prophetess is its ending. Miriam is excluded from the encampment for seven days (until her "snowy scales" fall away). She is excluded for reasons of ritual impurity, but still "the nation did not travel until she was added again" (Num. 12:15). The fact that the Torah mentions this instance speaks to Miriam's status as a leader in the community—a prophetess who communes with YHVH. The community waits for her before moving on. The symbolic valence of this action is easy to grasp—Miriam was obviously important enough for the community stay put until she was able to travel with them. Even as she is denigrated and opposed in favor of the leadership of Moses, she is simultaneously affirmed as an important member of her own society.

There are several other (short) instances involving Miriam in the Hebrew Bible. Some illuminate variant facets of her identity and cultural conception in the ancient Israelite world and cult, while others repeat information already given. Two more mentions appear in Numbers, one in Deuteronomy, and one each in Micah and First Chronicles.

Numbers 20:1 reads, "And the Children of Israel came, the entire assembly, to the Wilderness of Tzin in the first month, and the nation dwelled at Kadesh. And Miriam

⁴⁹ Burns, 75.

died there, and she was buried there.” In one of her most compelling arguments, Burns suggests that mention of Miriam’s death at all is a striking irregularity (the demise of those in the wilderness community is not often recorded), and that the proximity of Kadesh lays the groundwork for a possible “cult” of Miriam.⁵⁰ The existence of an actual cult does not concern me, but Miriam’s association with a specific place becomes a theme that reverberates forward into the lives of other prophetesses. A prophetess, as we will see, is often tied to a location, while a prophet lives a more peripatetic lifestyle. This creates a beautiful chiasm in their identities—as prophetesses move in the throes of prophecy, they are tied to one spot on the land, while prophets, speaking from a more stoic place, move restlessly across the world.

The third reference to Miriam in Numbers is in a genealogical list. “And the name of the wife of Amram was Yokheved, daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt. And she birthed for Amram Aaron, Moses, and Miriam, their sister” (Numbers 25:69). The passage goes on to tell the story of Nadav and Avihu, Aaron’s sons who died while offering “strange fire” before YHVH. Miriam is firmly placed within the Mosaic tradition as sister to both Moses and Aaron.⁵¹ In Micah, Miriam is again portrayed within the context of Moses and Aaron, given authority because of her familial relations (and her implied status as a prophetess). The words “sister” and “prophetess” do not appear in the text, however. “For I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and from the House of Slaves I redeemed you. And I sent before you Moses, and Aaron, and Miriam” (Mic. 6:4). All three become divine agents in this passage, sent by YHVH in the context of the

⁵⁰ Burns, 120.

⁵¹ It is because of this verse that the modern reader assumes Moses’ unnamed sister of Exodus 2 is Miriam.

Exodus from Egypt. Moses is mentioned first, but all three are on a similar plain—and the fact that Micah mentions neither their familial relationship, nor their status as leader, priest, and prophetess implies their popularity and the prevalence of their fame and importance.

These seven occurrences mark the extent of Miriam’s existence in the Hebrew Bible. She has a much longer life in late religious literature and Jewish folklore—legends surrounding her relationship with a miraculous well and timbrel have sprung up in numerous Jewish communities. I will stop my exploration of Miriam at the Tanakh, however; her evolution through post-biblical literature is the beginning of another study.⁵² She also has a long life in early Christian material—Gregory of Nyssa, in his treatise *On Virginity*, treats her as an example for all virgins.

What have we learned about Miriam? What makes her a prophetess? How does she serve as a paradigm for our other prophetesses? It is her identity as a woman, and her feminine body, that allows her to act as a vessel for the voice of YHVH. This womanhood creates space for other important factors. For example, Miriam speaks with God. While it is not necessarily face-to-face, it is certainly a direct communication. Miriam’s ritual at the Sea of Reeds is an act of physical prophecy, requiring the use of the verb meaning “respond” rather than the more likely “sing.” In other places, her physicality is clearly an important subject—hence the confrontation between her and Moses, and her subsequent bout of leprosy. Miriam was also an important identity within her community, however. The wandering Israelites were not willing to leave her in the

⁵² A study, I might add, that I will gladly undertake.

wilderness when she had *tzara 'at*, and waited seven days for her to heal before moving on. Her tomb is placed at Kadesh, the possible origin of her cult site.

Miriam's body is also a contested space. It is the site of punishment and prophecy, the location upon which masculine and feminine authority battle for the appropriation of her identity. With this feminine body, Miriam is able to dance on either side of the barrier that we see as dividing genders, performing activities commonly associated with men as well as women, and receiving honors and respect typically ascribed to both.

Miriam stands in the memories of the Jewish community as a leader and prophetess, taking up the timbrel to lead women in song and dance and commune directly with YHVH. As Penina Adelman points out, she has been a gathering point for Jewish feminists and the creation of new traditions.⁵³ A leader of women, she is the first visible figure in the long line of prophetesses and priestesses that speak with YHVH and commune directly with the divine. We can paint her features onto the faces and lives of others in this line. Others begin to take shape and lend pieces of themselves to Miriam, and soon an arc of women radiant with power and divinity begins to span across the bridges, gaps, and chasms that divide time and history.

⁵³ Penina V. Adelman, "A Drink from Miriam's Cup: Invention of Tradition among Jewish Women," in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Indiana, Indiana University Press, Fall 1994) 151-166.

Chapter 2 Arise, Arise, and Speak a Song: Deborah (דבורה)

Miriam is the prophetess of the wilderness, the voice that calls a weary nation to rest and rejuvenation. Deborah is the judge of the united tribes, a “mother in Israel.” She is written in ways that create parallels with Miriam as well as her own enemies, and yet explodes into her own place as a prophetess, judge, politician, warrior, and songstress with a personality, grace, and definition that other prophetesses lack. Her identity remains clearly present throughout her tale, even as it fights against its own subsumption, a fact that figures strongly into the poetic framework of her song.

Her story is recounted in Judges 4-5, with chapter 4 forming the bulk of the narrative, and chapter 5 being a victory song, similar in many ways to the song that Miriam chants in Exodus 15. There is another logical connection between the story of Deborah and Miriam’s song—in the liturgical Torah reading cycle of the Jewish calendar, Judges 4-5 form the *haftarah*, or supplementary reading from Prophets that is read when Exodus 15 is chanted in the synagogue.⁵⁴ These two readings were selected as readings for the same day because of their treatment of similar themes, as well as the poetic unity that binds them together. In synagogues, individuals first hear the songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15 before experiencing the story of Deborah. I will first briefly relate Deborah’s story, after which I will examine her prophetic identity.

At the beginning of Judges 4, Israel is under duress. The book of Judges is characterized by a continuous cycle of transgression, salvation, and repentance, with a

⁵⁴ Lieber, 423.

different “judge” or military and political leader rising to prominence every time the cycle is completed. God has “given them over into the hand of Yavin, the Canaanite king, who ruled Chatzor, and the minister of his army, Sisera” (Judg. 4:2). Susan Ackerman, using the scholarship of both Jo Ann Hackett and Victor Turner, suggests that all prophetesses rose to prominence in times of unrest or social dysfunction—or, as Ackerman later terms it, liminality.⁵⁵ Deborah’s authority, then, is best understood with regards to the transitional state of her society. It is worthwhile to explore prophetesses in light of Ackerman’s application of this theory (which is in itself her interpretation of Victor Turner’s theory⁵⁶ about rites of passage). As Ackerman has shown, all prophetesses participate in this discourse to some extent. Regardless of the source of her power, Deborah is an important woman who acts prominently in spheres traditionally ascribed to men. The beginning of her story reads:

¹And the children of Israel increased their evil doing in the eyes of YHVH, and Ehud was dead. ²And YHVH sold them into the hand of Yavin, a Canannite king who ruled in Chatzor, and the general of his army, Sisra, who dwelled in Charoshet-HaGoiim. ³And the children of Israel cried out to YHVH, for he had nine hundred iron chariots, and he oppressed the children of Israel with might for twenty years. ⁴And Deborah, a prophetess-woman, was the wife of Lapidot. She judged Israel at that time. ⁵And she sat under Deborah’s palm tree, between Ramah and Bet-El, on the mountain of Efraiim. And the children of Israel went up to her for judgment. ⁶And she sent for and called Barak son of Avinoam from Kedesh in Naftali, and she said to him, “Behold, YHVH the God of Israel has commanded, “Go! And march to Mount Tavor, and take with you ten thousand men from the children of Naftali and from the children of Z’vulun. ⁷And I will drag Sisra, the general of Yavin’s

⁵⁵ Susan Ackerman, “Why is Miriam also Among the Prophets? (And is Zipporah Among the Priests?),” in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, volume 121 issue 1 (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2002) 47-80.

⁵⁶ Ackerman, 64.

army, and his chariot, and his multitude to you, to the river Kishon, and I will give him into your hand.”

⁸And Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, then I will go. If you do not go with me, I will not go.”

⁹And she said, “I will indeed go with you—but you shall not have any glory on the road you are traveling, because YHVH will sell Sisra into the hand of a woman.” And Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh.

¹⁰And Barak called Z’vulun and Nafali to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up at his feet. And Deborah went with him.

¹¹And Hever the Kenite was separated from Kayin, from the children of Hovav, father-in-law of Moses, and he established his tent near the oak tree in Tza’anaiim, which is near Kedesh.

¹²And they told Sisra that Barak the son of Avinoam had gone up Mount Tavor. ¹³And Sisra called all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him from Charoshet HaGoiim to the river Kishon.

¹⁴And Deborah said to Barak, “Arise, for this is the day that God has given Sisra into your hand. Behold: YHVH has gone out before you.” And Barak went down from Mount Tavor, and there were ten thousand men after him. ¹⁵And YHVH panicked Sisra and all his chariots and all the camp to the lip of the sword before Barak. And Sisra alighted from his chariot and fled on foot. ¹⁶And Barak pursued the chariot behind the camp to Charoshet HaGoiim, and Sisra’s entire camp fell to the lip of the sword, and not even one person remained.

(Judg. 4:1-16)

When she is first introduced in Judges 4:4, Deborah’s name, like Miriam’s, is identified by the word *n’vi’ah*, marking her a prophetess. The action of the sentence constructs a parallel identity—the verb used, *shoftah*, means “to judge.” Is Deborah performing the dual roles of prophetess and judge? On the one hand, the redactor of the Book of Judges could have inserted this verb to make Deborah’s story fit in with the general narrative arc—identified solely a prophetess (indeed, as a woman!) she would have been out of place. The verb “judge” identifies Deborah as one in a line of authority

figures who participate in the cycle of transgression, judgment and redemption taking place during the transitional phase of Israelite society.

Conversely, the verb *shoftah* could in fact give the reader information about Deborah's function as a prophetess. In addition to singing and communing with God (which, we shall see later, she certainly does), she acts as a leader in the community, much in the same way that Miriam did. Indeed, her judgments themselves could be acts of prophecy. It is not such a stretch to imagine that, in a society in which politics and religion are part of the same structure, a judge is expected to receive their pronouncements and judgments from the divine. The verb itself carries many different shades of meaning, ranging from "to judge, to govern" all the way to "condemn" and "enter into controversy."⁵⁷ Some of these meanings also carry within them remnants of the divine power that bestows authority of judgment. It is the same verb used, for example, of YHVH as he sits in judgment at the end of days.⁵⁸

Judges 5 continues Deborah's introduction. Not only is her duty as a community leader and judge clarified, but in much the same way that we see Miriam⁵⁹ given a patch of earth on which to embody her office, Deborah too is identified with the land. "And she sat under Deborah's Date Palm, between Ramah and Beit-El, on the mountain of Ephraim. And the Children of Israel came up to her for judgment" (Judg. 4:5). The nominal construction of the phrase "*Tomer D'vorah*" can only be translated as a possessive, with the sense of a title. This is the name of a specific point on the earth—a

⁵⁷ Brown, *Lexicon*, 1048.

⁵⁸ Cf. Pss. 50:6, 75:8.

⁵⁹ At Kadesh: see earlier chapter on Miriam. Chapters 4 and 6 will also discuss how the Pythia and the Sibyl are both closely associated with specific points on the earth.

unique tree. This is, then, not any palm tree, but a specific one that Deborah has named her own—Deborah’s Date Palm. This date palm is the location to which the people would come, asking Deborah for her judgments.

It is not just her association with place that emphasizes Deborah’s authority. She displays her power the first time she calls Barak to her. “And she sent forth and called for Barak, son of Avinoam from Kedesh in Naftali...” (Judg 4:6). He does not come on his own as the mighty Israelite general, hoping to save his people—he is pulled out of the population by Deborah, and given a charge to defeat Yavin. Her authority is evident here. A judge and prophetess is respected enough to summon a man, and command him, without the authority of another man. Barak’s insistence that she fight the battle with him is another indicator of her respected status. He says, “If you will go with me, then I will go—but if you do not go with me, I shall not go.” For what reason would Barak, a military man, say this to a woman of no status or power? It is strange enough that Deborah needs to call and command Barak on her own—but the fact that he wants her, a judge and prophetess, but not a military leader, as a member of his war party speaks to how highly she was regarded, and how important she was to the operation’s success.

It is verse 9, however, that reveals both Deborah’s true power, as well as her place among other ancient Mediterranean prophetesses. In response to Barak’s request that she travel with him, she says, “I will indeed go with you—but you shall not have any glory on the road you are traveling, because YHVH will sell Sisra into the hand of a woman” (Judg. 4:9). Not only does Deborah agree to step out of the already exceptional role she occupies, but in doing so she warns Barak that there is more confusion of gender roles to come.

The content of this pronouncement proves to be oracular, showing that Deborah's authority manifests in both worldly and divine realms. Deborah states that a woman shall defeat Sisra. The reader, and supposedly Barak, both assume that Deborah is speaking about herself—for what other woman will be involved in this war? Verses 17 through 21 tell a different story, however. Yael the Kenite woman drives a stake through Sisra's brow. He meets his defeat, quite literally, at the hands of a woman. There is something Delphic about the way in which one interpretation is expected while a completely different one is revealed to be correct.

And Sisra fled on his feet to the tent of Yael, wife of Hever the Kenite, because there was peace between Yavin the king of Chatzor and between the house of Hever the Kenite. ¹⁸And Yael went out opposite Sisra, and she said to him, "Turn aside, my lord; turn aside to me! Do not fear!" And he turned to her, into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. ¹⁹And he said to her, "Please, get me a bit of water, for I became thirsty." And she opened a skin of milk, and quenched his thirst, and covered him.

²⁰And he said to her, "Stand by the entrance to the tent, and if a man should come by, and questions you saying, "Is there a man here?" say "No.""²¹And Yael, wife of Hever, took a tent-peg and put a hammer in her hand, and came to him quietly. And she blasted the tent-peg into his temple, and it descended into the ground. And he was very tired, and fell asleep, and died.

²²And behold, Barak was pursuing Sisra, and Yael came out opposite him and said to him, "Go, and I will show you the man whom you seek." And he came to her, and behold Sisra was falling dead, the tent-peg in his temple.

²³And that day, YHVH humbled Yavin the Canaanite king before the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel went very strongly and mightily against Yavin the Canaanite king, until they utterly destroyed Yavin the Canaanite king.

(Judg. 4:17-23)

Deborah, as well as the affects of her authority, are still present later in the narrative—especially in the content of her song. Whether at the camp or on the battle lines, she is a leader just as much as Barak is—a symbolic leader, true, but also a

religious leader. It is from her lips and through her body that the word of YHVH makes its way to the people, especially in a time of war. The earliest parts of the Torah show us that it is Miriam, not Moses who encourages the people and leads them in song during a military endeavor. Deborah fulfills a similar function here, a function that is described and defined in slightly more detail in her song in Judges 5.

¹And Deborah and Barak, son of Avinoam, sang on that day,
saying:
²“When locks are let go in Israel
in the dedication of the people, they praise YHVH.
³Listen, kings! Pay attention, sovereigns!
Let me, *me* sing to YHVH!
I shall make music for YHVH, the god of Israel.
⁴God, when you went out of Se’ir,
when you marched from the field of Edom,
The earth quaked and the heavens dripped.
Even the rain clouds dripped.
⁵The mountains flowed before YHVH
This is Sinai
Before YHVH, the God of Israel
⁶In the days of Shamgar son of Anat,
In the days of Yael, wanderers stopped.
And the walkers of paths went on crooked ways.
⁷They ceased in the countryside,
they ceased in Israel.
Until I arose, Deborah
Arose a mother in Israel.
⁸He will choose new gods
While there is a war in the gates,
If a lance or shield will be seen among forty thousand in Israel.
⁹My heart is with the commanders of Israel, the volunteers of the
nation—they praise YHVH.
¹⁰Riders of yellow she-donkeys, sitters upon saddle-rugs
and goers upon the way--converse!
¹¹From the voice of archers in the watering places,
there they recount the righteousnesses of YHVH
Righteousnesses to the countrymen of Israel.
Then the people of YHVH descended upon the gates.
¹²Arise, arise Deborah!
Arise, arise, speak a song!
Get up, Barak, and take captive your captives, son of Avinoam!

¹³ Then a survivor descended upon the mighty
the people of YHVH descended upon me in might.
¹⁴ From Ephraim, their roots of Amalek
after you, Benjamin your kinsmen
From Machir leaders descended
and from Zebulun the marchers with the officer's staff.
¹⁵ And the ministers of Issachar are with Deborah
and even was even with Barak, let loose into the valley.
In the streams of Reuben
great are the decisions of the heart.
¹⁶ Why did you dwell between two hearths,
to hear the flock's pipers?
For the streams of Reuben
great are the searchings of the heart.
¹⁷ Gilead dwelled in the land beyond the Jordan
and Dan, why will you live on boats?
Asher sat by the shore of the seas
and will dwell on the docks.
¹⁸ Zebulun is a people that reproached its soul to death
and Naftali on the high places of the field.
¹⁹ The kings came, they fought
so the kings of Canaan fought
at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo
they did not take a spoil of silver.
²⁰ The stars fought from the heavens
from their highways they fought with Sisra.
²¹ The river Kishon swept them away
the ancient river, the river Kishon
Go on the way, my soul, with might!
²² So the horse heels hammered
from the rushing and dashing of his valiant.
²³ "Curse Meroz!" said an Angel of YHVH
Terribly curse her dwellers
For they did not come to the aid of YHVH
to the aid of YHVH in the mighty ones.
²⁴ Yael shall be blessed from women
the wife of Hever the Kenite
Among all the women of the tent, she shall be blessed.
²⁵ He asked for water water
she gave milk
in the bowl of splendid ones
she brought butter near to him.
²⁶ She sent out her hand for the tent peg
and her right hand for the hammer of laborers
and she hammered Sisra

erased his head
 and shattered
 and passed through his temple.
²⁷Between her legs he bowed down, fell, and lay
 between her legs he bowed and fell
 and there he bowed
 there he fell, destroyed.
²⁸And there, in the window hangs out
 and shrilly cries Sisra's mother
 through the window lattice
 "Why is his chariot delayed with shame?
 Why are the thrusts of his wheels so late?"
²⁹The wisest of her ministers answer her,
 even she answers her speaking to herself.
³⁰"Indeed, they are dividing the spoil they found
 a womb, two wombs for the head of each man
 the spoil of colors for Sisra,
 the spoil of colors
 colored checkers, or embroidered cloths
 for each neck as spoil."
³¹So all your enemies will be destroyed, YHVH
 but his lovers—as the sun going out in his glory.
 And the land was quiet for forty years.

(Judg. 5:1-31)

Deborah's song starts in the same manner Miriam's does. While the verb used is different, a redactor made great efforts that allow the two to be identified together. "And Miriam called-and-responded..." (Ex. 15:21). The Hebrew verb used to describe Miriam's action in Exodus is *va-ta'an*, which, as discussed earlier, comes from the root *ayin-nun-heh*. The word that begins Deborah's song, "to sing," comes from the root *shin-yod-resh*, but the *yod* drops out as well, creating a form that looks similarly syncopated. Even more interestingly, the form is, yet again, a third person feminine singular, while the subject is a third person plural—both Deborah *and* Barak. Deborah is clearly the songstress here, performing in her element her ritual duty to magnify YHVH.

The performative aspect that so defined the prophecy of Miriam is present here. As a song, it would have been performed, and as a song led by a woman, it would have, like Miriam's chant, involved movement and dancing.⁶⁰ Through the similarities that are obviously apparent in Exodus 15 and Judges 5, a redactor was attempting to link these two stories, and specifically, these two poems. Therefore, while there is no verb that signifies call and response in the same way there is in Exodus, it is highly likely that Deborah's song was part of a praise ritual that involved a larger community. The presence of Barak also helps this explanation—he is both her co-leader in song, and part of her audience.

There is good textual evidence for the use of instrumentation in Deborah's song. Judges 5:3, which, among other things, is an example of the concept of parallelism, utilizes two different verbs for the idea of making music.⁶¹ The first is the same as the one used in Judges 5:1—*shin-yod-resh*. Its form here is a cohortative first person imperfect—*Ashirah*. Let me sing. The one used directly afterwards is a different root, *zayin-mem-resh*, which means to make religious music. This root is used very often in the psalms. For example, Psalm 92 begins "*Mizmor shir...*" which means "A psalm, a song."⁶² The psalms were likely accompanied by instrumental music⁶³ (there are many

⁶⁰ See, for example, 1 Chronicles 15:29. Saul's daughter Michal is "disgusted" at David's participation in a victory dance, an inversion of gender roles she seems to see as unacceptable.

⁶¹ David L. Petersen and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992) 21.

⁶² Brown, *Lexicon*, 274.

⁶³ James Limburg, "Psalms," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* volume V (New York, Doubleday, 1992) 536.

textual indicators of this⁶⁴), so it seems likely that the root *zayin-mem-resh* includes, in its array of meanings, a performative aspect. Deborah does not just sing and hymn to YHVH. She makes music for him.

We can see another indicator that Deborah is attempting to establish her own identity within a constrained space. As the song indicates, she is singing in praise of YHVH—she may even be singing in an inspired manner. When Deborah speaks in Judges 5:3, she both forcefully asserts her own agency and allows the reader to glimpse the battle that is taking place within her. When she says that she will sing to YHVH, Deborah uses a relatively rare form of the first person singular pronoun. She is speaking in an aspect that does not require pronouns because of indicators on the verb itself. The use of the regular first person pronoun, *ani*, would give the reader pause enough. Deborah, however, says *anochi*. This is not just “I.” This is “I” with a flourish, an underline, and a great amount of weight behind it.⁶⁵ *Anochi* is the first word of the First Commandment—“I am YHVH your God” (Ex. 34:28). Deborah does not speak this pronoun just once—she says it twice in the space of one verse, ensuring that it is her own identity that is seen singing. Regardless of whether or not there is a divine presence within her body, Deborah is capable of maintaining her prophetic and personal identity. She is separating herself both from Barak and the divinity that is inhabiting her. Her body is a contested space.

There is, however, a simultaneous phenomenon that creates space for the possibility of a struggle. The verb that accompanies *anochi* is normally translated as “I

⁶⁴ Limburg, 536.

⁶⁵ Brown, *Lexicon*, 59.

will sing.” This is not entirely correct. It is from the root *shin-yod-resh*, which, as discussed before, does indeed mean to sing. It is in the first person singular—but for it to be translated simply as “I will sing,” it would need to be *ashir*. There is an extra syllable on the end, so the verb reads *ashirah*. This extra syllable turns an indicative verb into a cohortative, carrying with it the meaning of encouragement, and to some degree, even permission. It would be better translated as “Allow me to sing,” or “let me sing.” Why is this relevant? The presence of a cohortative verb creates a tension between the practically subjunctive, indefinite nature of action and the concrete and formal meaning of *anochi*. In this tentative and non-finite verb, we can see hints of the struggle that must be taken place within Deborah—the fight between her charismatic identity as a prophetess, and the subordinate nature of a woman embodied by a divinity.

Judges 5:7 has several peculiarities. A traditional translation says, “Deliverance ceased, ceased in Israel, till you arose, O Deborah, Arose, O mother, in Israel!”⁶⁶ There is a note to the text on the word “arose.” It looks like the Biblical Hebrew first personal singular past perfect form of *kuf-vav-mem*, meaning “I arose,” but according to JPS, it is an “archaic second-person singular feminine.” I, however, have chosen to translate this phrase as “Until I arose, Deborah—arose a mother in Israel.” If Deborah is the one singing, why shouldn’t she speak in the first person about herself?

It is also necessary to examine the appositive nominative that accompanies the verb translated as “I arose.” Deborah arose a *mother* in Israel. We see the word for mother—*Em*—again in this poem, at the very end. In a beautifully poetic shift of action,

⁶⁶ The Jewish Publication Society, *The JPS Tanakh*. (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 2000).

the view pans out from YHVH's victory and focuses on Sisra's mother as she leans out the window, wondering when her son will come home. The use of the same word for mother in both places links the two women in a way that the other themes of the poem do not. Deborah's identity as a mother is clearly one of the central themes of the poetic work, the thread that, more than victory and passion, binds the disparate scenes together.

If it occurred in isolation, the reference to Deborah as a mother in Israel could be construed as an abstract metaphor, playing off the idea of a woman rising to a position of power and thus becoming a "mother" to those beneath. However, in conjunction with the image of Sisra's mother, the image takes on a more concrete meaning. Sisra's mother is shown in a detailed scene—she leans out the window, "cries shrilly," and peers through the lattice. She is surrounded by her handmaidens, one of whom ponders the riches Sisra will have plundered from the Israelites. These women represent the ultimate tragedy of the Canaanites: they do not yet know that all their men have been defeated, and a woman has destroyed their glorious commander, Sisra.

The physicality that is apparent in the song's epilogue lends a more nuanced tone to the appellation of Deborah as a mother. No evidence of her children is given, but that is irrelevant. She is a mother to her people, standing in opposition to the helpless, foolish, and defeated mother of Sisra. She is returned from battle victorious, and leads the people in praise to YHVH—and as the last verse of Judges 5 tells us, under Deborah, the land remains calm for 40 years.

Deborah has added to our understanding of the feminine prophetic identity in many ways. Like Miriam, she was a religious leader of her people—but even more so, she was a military leader. She exists in literature in an association with a specific place,

where she both communicates with divinity and enacts her own judgments. There is a military aspect to her persona that is evidenced in the narrative of the war, and her prophecy is not a static, wooden thing—her songs are performed in tandem with others, likely with musical instruments. She is very clearly a woman, and identifies herself as such—but also performs actions often associated with men. She blurs the line between “masculine” and “feminine” when she acts as a leader, not necessarily performing a singular gender role.

The narrative in Judges 5, Deborah’s song, is constructed through three different women, each of which has no contact with the other two. Deborah defeats the Canaanite army, Yael destroys Sisra, and Sisra’s mother mourns. Language of bodies in the song helps to highlight the inherent physicality of the prophetic woman’s experience. For example, Sisra dies between Yael’s legs, an image that has connotations of both birth and sexuality. Yael’s mother leans out the window, awaiting her son with her whole body.

Then, of course, there is the actual prophetic nature of Deborah’s declarations. Deborah speaks cryptically, and actions follow logically. There is only one such event recorded in the text, but there is no telling whether or not there was more to the Deborah mythos that existed in the Israelite consciousness. In Deborah’s actions, attributes, and attestations, we begin to see the prophetesses of Israel and Greece awaken, and take their place on the arc that spans miles and millennia. They answer her call when she rises to speak her song.

Chapter 3 **Because Your Heart was Tender: Huldah (חולדה)**

Huldah does not live in the collective folklore and consciousness of the modern Jewish people in quite the same way that Miriam and Deborah do, but when viewed on the arc of feminine prophecy, she becomes a critical component in the understanding the gendered tension that exists upon it. Because of her participation in a realm of masculine authority, focus is removed from her body and the physical nature of prophecy. It is this removal, however, that allows us to see just how crucial the body is for a speaking prophetess. Huldah's appearances, like Miriam's, are brief, and limited to her oracular pronouncements. She appears in 2 Kings 22, and the same story is retold in 2 Chronicles 34. Very little biographical information is given, but again, as with the other prophetesses, there is much more to be gleaned from the text than simply a narrative.

The arc of action in Huldah's story is simple. The High Priest Hilkiah finds a book of Teaching in the Temple, and it is eventually brought to King Josiah's attention. He is troubled upon reading it, and instructs several court officials to "seek YHVH for me and for the people and for all Judah on the words of this found book" (2 Kings 22:13). These officials choose to ask Huldah, a prophetess living in Jerusalem to authenticate the text. Not only does her pronouncement prove the validity of the book that is brought to her, but it serves as an oracle—if the people of Judah do not follow the laws laid out in writing, they will suffer terribly because of it. The only one to be spared is king Josiah, "Because [his] heart was tender and [he was] humble before YHVH's face" (2 Kings 22:19). The oracle seems to say that he will die before the suffering takes place.

Immediately after hearing these words, Josiah begins the process of reforming the Kingdom of Judah. Following a symbolic renewal of the covenant (2 Kings 23:3), he orders his priests to eradicate all the alien idols in the Temple, and eventually in the entire kingdom. Altars are shattered, tabernacles are destroyed, and all manner of different actions are taken in order to insure the religious purity of Judah. Sacrifices are eventually reinstated, and it is written of Josiah that “there was none like him before—a king who turned to YHVH with all his heart and all his soul and all his power, as with the entire teaching of Moses; nor did anyone like him rise afterwards” (2 Kings 23:25). YHVH’s wrath, however, is not mollified. The Pharaoh of Egypt, supposedly at YHVH’s incitement, marches against Assyria, and Josiah goes to fight him at Meggido. Josiah is slain there and brought back to Jerusalem where his son is anointed king.

This narrative raises several questions, two of which are directly relevant to this thesis. Firstly, why was Huldah the authority chosen to authenticate the book of the Teaching, and secondly, why was Josiah slain in battle? It seems quite clear from Huldah’s oracle that he is to die *before* YHVH’s vengeance comes about. Both these questions can be discussed with the careful attention that text requires, but no answer is readily available. There are, however, several theories that have been presented.

Historical evidence tells us that Huldah was active at the same time as the prophet Jeremiah.⁶⁷ While he was wandering the land and performing his ministry, she was in Jerusalem, married to a man described as the “keeper of robes” (2 Kings 22:14). Many commentators have taken this to mean that both were members of the court—the “keeper of robes” was an official with some connection to the king’s wardrobe, and Huldah,

⁶⁷ Ackerman, 50.

described as “the prophetess dwelling in Jerusalem, in the Mishneh quarter,” was a court prophetess (2 Kings 22:14). When Huldah is considered a prominent prophetess in the ancient Mediterranean, it becomes very clear why she was involved in this episode.

Alongside the context of Jeremiah’s wandering ministry, Huldah’s association with Jerusalem becomes more evident and gains more importance. She is, like Deborah, the Pythia, and the Sibyl (as we will see), a woman with a unique place on the face of the earth. She does not need to wander to spread her message—she is only able to transmit it from her chosen plot of land. The historical juxtaposition of Huldah and Jeremiah creates an even stronger case for the basic gendering of prophetic attributes, and the bodily involvement that feminine prophecy necessitates alongside the peripatetic nature of a man’s ministry.

Huldah’s narrative is presented in this way in 2 Kings 22:

⁸And Hilkiyah the High Priest said to Shaphan the scribe, “I found the Teaching in the House of YHVH.” And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shafan, and he read it. ⁹And Shafan the scribe came to the king, and answered the king with a word, and he said, “Your servants have poured out the silver which was found in the House, and the have given it on hand to the doers of work overseeing the House of YHVH.” ¹⁰And Shafan the scribe told the king, saying, “Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book,” and Shafan read it before the king.

¹¹And it was, when the king heard the words of the book of Teaching, he ripped his clothes. ¹²And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest and Achikam son of Shafan and Achbod son of Michaiah and Shafan the scribe, and Asaiah the servant of the king, saying, ¹³“Go, and seek YHVH for me and for the people and for all Judah on the words of this found book. For the wrath of YHVH which has been sparked against us is great, because our fathers did not listen to the words of this book, to do all that is written for us.”

¹⁴And Hilkiyah the priest and Achikam and Achbod and Shafan and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess, wife of Shallum son of Tikvah son of Harhas, the one who keeps the clothes. And

she dwelled in Jerusalem, in the Mishneh, and they spoke to her.
¹⁵And she said to them, “So said YHVH, the God of Israel: “Say to the man who sent you to me,
¹⁶“Thus says YHVH, “Here I am bringing evil to this place, and upon its inhabitants, as with all the words of the book which the king of Judah has read. ¹⁷Because they have forsaken me, and burned incense to other gods for the sake of angering me with all the works of their hands, and my anger has sparked in this place, and it shall not be extinguished.
¹⁸And to the king of Judah who sent you to seek YHVH the God of Israel, these words which you heard: ¹⁹Because your heart was tender and you were humble before YHVH’s face when you heard what I decreed upon this place and its inhabitants—to be for wasteland and for a curse—and you tore your clothes and you wept before my face, and even I heard you—an utterance of YHVH.
²⁰Therefore, here I remove you to your fathers, and you will be received into your tomb in peace. And your eyes shall not see all the evil which I am bringing onto this place.” And they returned the word to the king.

(2 Kings 22
8:20)

2 Chronicles 34 also contains an account of Huldah’s prophecy and pronouncement. There are very few differences between that text and the one that has been studied here—the majority exists only in the list of names given. Otherwise, vocabulary, grammar, and content are the same. In most places, in fact, the narratives are perfectly identical. With that in mind, I will operate mostly from the text presented above.

When taken in the framework of other prophetesses, it is interesting to note that only Huldah among the biblical prophetesses interacts with the written word. She interprets a *sefer*, a book of Teaching. Most translations choose to translate the Hebrew word *sefer* as “scroll,”⁶⁸ from the root *samech-feh-resh*, meaning “to enumerate.”⁶⁹ I have chosen to use a slightly weightier word—I translate *sefer* as “book” because of its

⁶⁸ *JPS Tanakh*

⁶⁹ Brown, *Lexicon*, 707.

connection with the “Book of Teaching,” not because it is an actual codex. It also has connections to the idea of a collected literary grouping. Many scholars agree that the actual text of this “book” was Deuteronomy 12-22,⁷⁰ meaning it was a part of the pre- (as well as post-) canonized Torah. The most common name for the Torah is the *Sefer Torah*, or “Book of the Teaching,” even though it is physically a scroll.

It is certain that the text Huldah encountered *was* in scroll form. Translating it as a “book,” however, allows one to think about the content of the text, and not the form (which is less important here). Also important is that the word for “book” is a masculine noun, and “scroll,” or *megillah*, is a feminine noun. Certain sections of the Hebrew Bible are referred to as *megillot*, or scrolls,⁷¹ so the concept of this separation is not necessarily new. Texts in this time period were written by scribes, the bulk of whom, if not all, were male,⁷² This is underscored even more in the narrative by the presence of Shafan the scribe, a male character intimately associated with the written word.

We have already examined the very masculine nature of the written Torah in our discussion of Miriam.⁷³ As noted in Sperling’s article, many parts of the Torah can be seen as allegorical representations of the power struggle between different parties. In particular, as we saw with Miriam, the written Torah can represent masculinity and the patriarchal priority of biblical interpretation, while prophecy and the unwritten law are commonly seen as feminine.⁷⁴ Throughout the course of Jewish history, the agency of biblical interpretation has been rooted firmly in the masculine realm. Fascinatingly

⁷⁰ Ackerman, 51.

⁷¹ Specifically Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. *JPS Tanakh*.

⁷² Saldarini, 1012.

⁷³ See earlier, Miriam section.

⁷⁴ See Miriam chapter, Sperling, 71.

enough, Huldah straddles this divide, though a woman and not normally associated with the written word.⁷⁵ How she manages to straddle this divide becomes the important question. One way she does this is to refrain from the injection of her physical body in prophetic speech, which allows her to act as an interpreter of the Torah.

This association goes even deeper—seemingly the king himself cannot read the scroll, and needs to have it read to him. “And Shafan the scribe told the king, saying, ‘Hilkiah the priest has given me a book,’ and Shafan read it before the king” (2 Kings 22:10). The scribe is established as a male authority figure with control over the reception and interpretation of the law. Where does Huldah fit in, and why is her authority necessary to authenticate the book? Why can Shafan not interpret the text on his own?

As a prophetess, Huldah has experience and knowledge of the divine word, and should be able to tell the difference between a human law (i.e., one written by scribes) and a divine law (the Torah). Huldah, however, is in danger of experiencing a serious risk as she authenticates the divine word. Not only does prophecy turn the feminine body into a contested space, as shown before, but Huldah is also in danger of violence if her words are seen as false or somehow corrupt. As a scribe, Shafan would certainly have priority for the legislation and implementation of legal matters—but not necessarily the connection to YHVH that a prophetess like Huldah would. The problem of authenticity, and divining whether or not a text is part of YHVH’s law, can only be managed by a prophet or prophetess. Why Huldah, though? Why not Jeremiah?

⁷⁵ Sperling, 70.

On one level, it follows the *Tanakh's* logic to put a woman, and not a man, into a risky physical position. As Eilberg-Schwartz discusses, the female body and voice are threats to masculinity. If a woman is put in danger because of what she says, it is less problematic than if a man does.

On another level, as discussed earlier, prophecy is the result of divine inhabitation within a human body. The resulting prophecy has two “parents” or sources, one divine and the other human, one symbolizing the masculine force (the divine) and one the feminine (the human). The written law is masculine. It is read by scribes and received from Moses (at least, according to tradition).⁷⁶ The fact that Hilkiyah chose to take it to Huldah, however, shows that another source of authority—a feminine source—was needed to authenticate the law as well as the prophecy it contained.

The pronouncements contained within the text would affect all of Judah. If indeed the scroll was Deuteronomy 12-22, the first verse is “These are the laws and the judgments which you shall follow to do in the land which YHVH the God of your fathers gave you as a possession, all the days which you are living on the ground” (Deut. 12:1). It was imperative in Josiah’s mind that, if the law were applicable, it be pronounced in a way that was acceptable to every sector of society. Involving both the scribe and the prophetess ensured a holistic understanding that would permeate and be understood by all of Judah. The presence of both masculine and feminine authority, both them straddling gender barriers, would create a united statement that was practically incontrovertible.

⁷⁶ Mishnah Avot, 1:1. “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly.”

When Huldah participates in this action, however, she places her own body at risk (as demonstrated by Josiah's later death).

There are still more interesting talking points in Huldah's story, however. She makes a prophecy that seemingly does not hold true, that Josiah will die in peace, and not see the terrible judgments that YHVH is about to bring upon the land. However, in 2 Kings 23:29, "Pharaoh Necho the king of Egypt arose against the king of Assyria on the river Euphrates, and king Josiah went against him, and when he saw him, (Pharaoh Necho) slew him." This is a puzzling dilemma, involving the direct circumvention of a divine prophecy. When considered in the light of other prophecy in the ancient Mediterranean, however, especially Delphic oracles, an explanation presents itself.

Delphic oracles often seem to mean one thing but in reality present a future very different from the one expected. Subtleties of language and meaning become paramount in their interpretation, and the intricacies of wordplay and association must often be remembered. What exactly, then, does Huldah say to Josiah? The actual result clause of her prophecy states, "And your eyes will not see all the evil which I am bringing upon this place" (2 Kings 22:20). This statement seems relatively straightforward positive. Josiah is a man whose "heart was tender and [was] humble before YHVH's face" (2 Kings 22:19). In a seeming reversal of Moses' punishment⁷⁷, he will not have to see the obliteration of his people, land and kingdom.

⁷⁷ Moses was not allowed to see the Israelites settle in the land of Israel because of an episode recounted in Num. 20:9-11. Josiah's punishment is a parallel—his reward, it seems, is that he does not have to see his own people die in the land, while Moses' punishment was that he could not see his own people live in the land they had sought for forty years.

Sometimes, especially in the shadowy world obscured by prophecy and oracles, the simplest explanation is disregarded for a much more metaphorical or mystical meaning. Cows become years and stars become brothers⁷⁸—but every once in a while, a prophecy can be interpreted exactly as it is written. This is the method that I propose here. Josiah will not see the destruction that God is bringing upon “this place.” What is this place? When Huldah is speaking, it can be nothing other than Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah. Josiah is the king of Judah, the kingdom of both his body and spirit. This is the land he is closely tied to, the population that he will be devastated to see die, and the future that he will not be able to bear. Therefore, he does *not* see the destruction. He is killed near Megiddo, a site in the Kingdom of Israel. This is presumably before any invasion of the kingdom of Judah.

Josiah’s body is returned to Jerusalem by his servants, who return him in a chariot and bury him. This fulfills the second part of the prophecy—“and you will be received into your tomb in peace” (2 Kings 22:20). No attack is made against the chariot rushing from the north, and the text does not record any other impediment to Josiah’s burial. Reading between the lines, a reader can almost see the solemn funeral, as the body of a respected king is laid to rest in his tomb—after all, “after him, no one similar arose” (2 Kings 23:25).⁷⁹ Translated so literally, the prophecy loses the misty veils of Delphic obscurity, only to reveal a heart-wrenching truth about a beloved king.

Huldah’s identification as a prophetess is simply the first layer to a complex and prominent woman who danced along the line between temporal and religious power. Her

⁷⁸ See Genesis 37 for the Joseph narrative.

⁷⁹ There are definite parallels between this statement and the death of Moses. See Deut. 34:10.

ability to authenticate religious text speaks volumes, and her willingness to prophesy to a king, even though she knew of his imminent death tells a story power connections and prophetic bodies in ancient Israel. As was demonstrated in her authentication of the Book of Teaching, Huldah's femininity was an important, if not definitive aspect of her social, spiritual, and even political identity. Though we do not see prophecy taking place within her body, she can still be interpreted within this model: as a textual representative of the masculinity of Torah, she is removed from the bodily and physical prophecy of Miriam and Deborah. Huldah is both an earthly woman and wife, and a member of the mysterious yet lengthy chain that connects humanity to YHVH through the physicality of prophecy.

Chapter 4 I Hear the One Unspeaking: The Pythia (Ἡ Πυθία)

I now turn away from the stories of individual women to widen and refine my gaze to rest upon not one prophetess, but on one who is many—the Pythia. As a literary character within a received tradition, she is difficult to pinpoint and discuss, because her references and stories are almost as varied as the oracles that have been left behind. Since the Pythia was an office (or perhaps more correctly, a role) and not a specific woman, the analysis of her identity becomes both harder and easier. Biographical information about individual women who spoke with the voice of Pythian Apollo is practically non-existent. Therefore, many of the questions that must be grappled with when studying the Israelite prophetesses—marriage, social standing, occupation, and others—can be left out of the equation. The Pythia exists entirely as an entity within herself, seated atop a bronze tripod as she inhales Gaia’s breath.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Pythia’s prophecy is the fact that it exists within, around, and entirely because of her body. As a woman, (according to ancient theories) she is created of a softer, spongier, and more penetrable tissue than males (Hippocrates, *Diseases of Women*, 1.1). I believe that this concept of porosity allows deities (specifically Apollo) to have an easier time entering women’s bodies. Her essence, or *logos*, as Aristotle would term it, is much cooler than the warm *logos* of a man (Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*). Her body’s material is central to her ability to prophesy, and as we saw in a short discussion of both Hesiod and Teiresias, men who would prophesy display a need to claim a feminine body.

The Pythia's simultaneous multiplicity and singularity, along with the enduring importance of her physicality, allows us to take the Pythia alone of all the prophetesses (at least the ones in this study) as one whose identity lies closest to the actual essence of a prophetess itself. The only external indicator of identity is her existence in this role. Her words and prophecies, especially when they are transmitted through literature and tradition, must be understood as an outpouring of the prophetess' identity, and not her specific human identity. The Pythia's prophecies come from the body and identity of the Pythia.

This is not to say that these individual women do not matter. The existence of priestesses of Apollo who became his Pythiai is documented (just not on an individual level).⁸⁰ But just as we regard Miriam's story as one complete narrative though it may well be the result of several competing traditions,⁸¹ we must also understand that the Pythia is a unified entity stretching across Greek history.⁸² The aim of this project is only partially historical—instead of trying to reconstruct the individual lives and identities of prophetesses through archaeology and historical facts, its goal is to recreate the meaning around them, and to understand perhaps a little more what it meant (and means) for a woman to speak for the divine.

⁸⁰ H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle: Volume I, the History*. (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1956) 34. Parke tells us much about the maidens who might have been Pythiai—they were not necessarily well born, and there seems to be some sort of disagreement about whether or not they were young maidens or older women.

⁸¹ Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible* (Washington, D. C., the Biblical Archaeological Society, 1989), 14-29.

⁸² At least, she is in this study. For over a thousand years a woman served in a similar capacity in the same location with the same occupation—and for the purposes of this study, such a prophetess has a unique and coherent identity that stretches across time.

Another factor that becomes important in the discussion of Greek prophetesses, specifically the ones that are being examined here, is the identity of the divinity they speak for. Most are prophetesses of Apollo. Other divinities speak through men—for example, Zeus' will is understood by priests at Dodona, and the Muses almost always inspire male poets. There are, however, also oracles of Themis and Gaia that bear consideration—what might it mean for a prophetess to speak with a feminine voice? Can her identity survive this in a way that it cannot survive a similar encounter with a male without being subsumed? Unfortunately, these prophetesses exist only as whispers and footnotes gracing larger literary works. Our work today focuses on the prophetess speaking for a male god. Since Apollo is almost exclusively the only Hellenic, Hellenistic, and Roman male deity that utilizes prophetesses, I have chosen to treat him, for the most part, in a manner similar to YHVH in the Hebrew Bible. He is not the only god capable of inspiration—but since he is the only male in the business of speaking through females, he inhabits a unique space, just like YHVH when inspiring Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah.

Finally, the problem of history and myth comes to the forefront when discussing the Pythia. There is documented historical proof of her existence, her cult, and even her oracles—much literature survives in the corpus known as Delphic Oracles, and they all seem to be prophecies from some sort of authority at Delphi. These prophecies exist in tales of the Pythia in myth and story that extend far beyond the bounds of history. What should be studied, then? Which prophecies should be taken into account when exploring the identity and prophecy of Apollo's oracle, and how can we make sure that both history and literature are represented in our interpretation?

Wormell, Parke and Fontenrose have analyzed the Pythia's oracles and categorized them into separate groups, paying close attention to source, style, and historicity. Parke and Wormell, pioneer scholars on the subject, divided the Pythia's activity into several subsets—the Pythia in myth, both legendary and epic; the Pythia in religion, and her interactions with deities, heroes, cults, and private “enquirers.”⁸³ Fontenrose takes a slightly different approach, and divides them into historical responses, quasi-historical responses, legendary responses, and fictional responses.⁸⁴

I do not propose reorganizing the responses that previous scholars have categorized, or even choosing one method of division over another. Both modes have their merits, and can be used to understand different aspects of the Pythia.⁸⁵ My goal is to use a sampling of the Pythia's responses that represents most, if not all of these categories. I examine the Pythia as a prophetess within a received religious and literary tradition. The most important aspect of this analysis, then, is looking at stories of the Pythia in religious contexts, and in tales that have been received within the modern understanding of “Classical literature.”

What stories, myths, legends, and historical accounts should be used, then? To a great extent, this can seem like an arbitrary decision—an author deciding what tales his audience may or may not have heard. I have tried to select stories across a broad spectrum, but since a discussion of all of them would blow the scope of this project into monumental proportions, a limit must be kept. I have chosen tales that I believe to be

⁸³ Parke, vi.

⁸⁴ Joseph Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle. Its responses and operations, with a catalogue of responses* (Berkeley, the University of California Press, 1978), 7-9.

⁸⁵ Besides, it would take years, as they have demonstrated, to even begin such a momentous task.

well known, and that have some degree of salience in today's world.⁸⁶ I will start with two tales from Herodotus—his account of the Pythia's responses to Croesus, and his account of Themistocles' interpretation of her oracle to Athens. An analysis of the Pythia's introduction to Aeschylus' *The Eumenides* will follow, in which the Pythia both identifies herself as one in a long chain of prophetesses, and presents further evidence for the fact that it is her feminine body that allows her to be both a prophetess and a consort of Apollo.

Before the Pythia's identity itself can be explored, the necessary outside factors must be understood. As far as we know, the oracle itself with the Pythia as prophetess was founded at least as early as the eighth century BCE.⁸⁷ By the sixth century BCE it was the most popular of all Greek oracular sites, and it enjoyed this prestige until the last oracle was given, traditionally dated to 393, when Theodosius ordered the destruction of all pagan temples.⁸⁸ For much of the time of the oracle's operation, its center was the vast temple of Apollo at Delphi on the slopes of Mount Parnassus. Modern archaeologists have not reached consensus on details such as the location of the Pythia's tripod and whether or not gaseous fumes from underground caves were the true source of her inspiration. Nevertheless, her presence in association with the Temple of Apollo at Delphi is attested in too many sources to be false.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ I realize that this qualification can be problematic—but for the most part, the most commonly known stories of the Pythia involve her oracles to Croesus and Themistocles, and *The Eumenides* is a well-known production.

⁸⁷ Parke, 3.

⁸⁸ Fontenrose, 1.

⁸⁹ Cf. Pausanias, Homeric Hymn to Apollo, the Homeric Epics, etc.

The most important implication of the archaeology and text surrounding Apollo's shrine at Delphi is their association of the Pythia with one specific place. More than the temple and tripod, it was the very stuff of the earth at Delphi that tied her to the land and helped to bestow her oracular authority. The legend of Gaia and Themis' oracles on this spot strengthens this idea. As Fontenrose points out, the story of their cults was likely contrived to give Apollo's oracle and shrine even more credence.⁹⁰ In doing so, the myth underscores the idea that it is the place that is important, regardless of which deity resides there. Just as Deborah had her palm tree and Miriam may have had some sort of shrine at Kadesh, the Pythia had Delphi. The Homeric Hymn to Apollo, in fact, names Delphi as Pytho before Apollo captures it (*Hymn to Pythian Apollo*, 183). The fact that even the Pythia's name is tied to the land emphasizes the relationship that prophetesses had with the land on which they prophesied. The Pythia stands in relation to the Israelite prophetesses on this point. During the time of Deborah, her palm tree was the center of justice in the land. Likewise, Delphi was the spiritual center of the ancient Greek world.⁹¹ Prophetesses from both traditions perform their oracles and speeches in communion with a certain point on the earth's surface.

The Pythia speaks often in Herodotus, with oracles and prophecies for many different people. She is also not the only prophetess mentioned—there are oracles in Libya, Dodona, and Milesia, among others. Her oracular authority, however, is established in an episode near the beginning of the *Histories*, in which Croesus, king of Lydia, chooses to question every oracle he knows of and see which one is correct. He

⁹⁰ Fontenrose, 1. Fontenrose argues that by making Delphi the site of a prior oracle, Apollo was able to assume another's authority rather than try and create his own.

⁹¹ Parke, 1

therefore sends envoys to all the oracles in Greece and Libya, and on the hundredth day, each asks the same question—“τι ποιέων τυγχάνοι ὁ Λυδῶν βασιλεὺς Κροῖσος ὁ Ἀλυάττεω” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.47).⁹² What was Croesus, king of the Lydians, son of Alyattes, doing at that moment?

According to Herodotus, every envoy returns with a response, and after perusing all of them, Croesus realizes that the only true oracle is the Oracle at Delphi. Only the Oracle at Delphi knew what he was doing at that moment—chopping up a tortoise and lamb, and cooking them together in a cauldron (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.48). What was the Pythia’s response that Croesus was so confident in her oracular authority?

οἶδα δ’ ἐγὼ ψάμμου τ’ ἀριθμὸν καὶ μέτρα θαλάσσης,
καὶ κωφοῦ συνίημι, καὶ οὐ φωνεῦντος ἀκούω.
ὄδμή μ’ ἐς φρένας ἦλθε κραταιρίνοιο χελώνης
ἐφομένης ἐν χαλκῷ ἅμ’ ἀρνείοισι κρέεσσιν,
ἧ χαλκὸς μὲν ὑπέστρωται, χαλκὸν δ’ ἐπιέσται.

(Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.47)

This can be translated as:

And I know the count of the sand, and the measure of the sea
And I perceive of dumbness, and hear the one unspeaking.
A smell has come to my senses, of a strong-shelled tortoise
Boiling in bronze, together with lamb meat,
But the bronze is under it, and the bronze is atop it.

Clearly, she was correct—Croesus was making a tortoise and lamb stew, and the Pythia was the only prophetess with enough divine authority to know it. There is much more to the oracle, though, than the simple fact of the information it conveys and that it was correct. What more can we learn through exploring the Pythia’s words?

⁹² All translations are my own.

The first thing to jump out is the form of the oracle itself. Herodotus preserves five lines in dactylic hexameter—the traditional meter of epics, and as evidenced by both earlier and later examples, the preferred meter of oracular responses. As the sole mode of both Greek and Latin epics, dactylic hexameter carries with a performative sense. Epics are meant to be performed—they are sung, or at the very least chanted, and performed in front of crowds of people. During Herodotus’ time, there were competitions at theatrical events that involved the performance of epic poetry.⁹³ In their original context, the epics would have been performed for crowds of people, either at banquets or other gatherings.⁹⁴ Most of these epics, like the majority of Greek poetry, would have been accompanied by musical instruments as well. The use of hexameter in the Pythia’s oracular responses speaks to the association of prophecy with poetry, and specifically epic poetry. Just as Deborah sang in the grand style of biblical poets, as well as Miriam with her call-and-response, the Pythia prophesies in a way that involves the people around her, either as active participants in the process or as an audience.

Another interesting aspect of the Pythia’s utterance is the presence of first person singular verbs and pronouns. Though she speaks with the voice of Apollo, the “I” in her statements becomes ambiguous. Who is it that knows the measure of the sea and hears the one unspeaking? Is it the Pythia, or Apollo? Such a distinction is impossible to make, and it is in cases like this, where the prophetess speaks for the deity in first person that we can begin to see her body as a battleground for her identity. She does not always

⁹³ Hubert Cancik and Helmut Schneider, “Epic,” in *Brill’s New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* vol. 4 (Boston, Brill, 2004), 1041.

⁹⁴ Christopher G. Brown, “Poetry, Epic,” in *Encyclopedia of Greece and the Hellenic Tradition* ed. Graham Speake (Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000) 1342.

speak with such a distinct voice—at other times, her utterances are in the third person, implying an identity slightly farther away from the action she is performing. In the oracle that Herodotus records, however, she knows, perceives, and even hears—a smell comes, and makes itself known to her senses. She could very well be speaking both for herself and for Apollo, who has given her the ability to know what she cannot physically perceive.

Other aspects of her representation underscore the prophetess's body as a battleground. The very clothing that the Pythia wears marks her as a woman torn between conflicting ideas of femininity. Wormell and Parke say that though later Pythiai were women over the age of fifty, they wore costumes of young maidens.⁹⁵ They suggest that this costume represented ritual purity. Her lifestyle was one of chastity and purity, therefore her clothing must reflect that. I believe that the idea and image of an older woman, possibly even a mother, in a virgin's clothing would have sent a very different message—this is a woman who encompasses maidenhood and motherhood, in a way similar to the Biblical prophetesses who were active in transitional periods. When ancient ideas about the body and how it served as a physical space for the creation, gestation, and birth of prophecy are considered, a more nuanced understanding becomes available.⁹⁶ The Pythia was simultaneously a virgin and beyond the age of childbearing, and yet she participated in a very real act of birth. All aspects of her physicality cause incredibly different human experiences to be blended on her physical appearance. Her

⁹⁵ Parke, 35.

⁹⁶ Sissa, 22

body, the way in which she sits (as we shall see), and clothing allowed for all these phases to exist at once within her.

According to Herodotus, Croesus requests information from the Pythia yet again. He sends her caravans laden with gold and other riches, ultimately asking her, “εἰ στρατεύηται ἐπὶ Πέρσας Κροῖσος καὶ εἴ τινα στρατὸν ἀνδρῶν προσθέοιτο φίλον;” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.53). “Should Croesus take up the field against the Persians? Should he run towards a friendly army of men?” The Pythia’s response is not given in verse this time, but Herodotus is recording it in indirect discourse. “ἦν στρατεύηται ἐπὶ Πέρσας, μεγάλην ἀρχὴν μιν καταλύσειν” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.53). If he were to take up the field against the Persians, he would obliterate a mighty empire. This is a categorically different type of response than the one previously given, and deserves a detailed analysis if only for that reason (although there are, of course, many other reasons to pay attention to it).

This is one of the Pythia’s best-known utterances. In conjunction with many other oracles, it has served to further the reputation of Delphic responses as misleading and hard to understand. As most readers know, Croesus understands the empire that the Pythia mentions to be the Persian—but as fate would have it, it is his own. Another, similar oracle is given to Croesus (this time in verse), and from that point on, it becomes quite clear that Croesus’ misinterpretation and even his hubris lead to his final slaughter. I have already discussed how one of Deborah’s utterances can be compared to the Delphic oracles (in the sense of having multiple and often conflicting meanings). The Pythia, however, stands as our prime example. Is the issue at hand, however, the fact that humans cannot correctly interpret the will of divinity, or is something else at play?

In her groundbreaking work *Le Corps Virginal*, Giulia Sissa presents and develops the idea of the prophetess' body as a vessel where several forces are in combat. One of the most important attributes of the Pythia, whether she was a young maiden or a once-married woman, was her purity—what in the past has been termed her virginity. It was this purity of body and soul that allowed the Pythia to speak with Apollo's voice. A good Pythia's soul was absent of pain and passion, as well as feeling, doubt, and any other emotion. "Inevitably, the interference of the Pythia's own passions gives rise to a hybrid movement."⁹⁷ A realistic Pythia, however, no matter how prepared she was, was still a human. It is this humanity, according to Sissa, which creates the enigmatic nature of the oracular response. No matter how clear the lens of the prophetess' soul, it is the fact that, unlike the god, she was not divine that created confusion and misunderstanding. "The Pythia stands delicately balanced between the impossibility of stifling all her own feelings...balanced on the ridge where the male god married the female voice, where truth veiled itself in a sign."⁹⁸ Her body is a battleground, containing a soul that rages against the impossibility of its own existence.

Herodotus' Pythia displays this theory quite nicely. She cannot speak in the pure, resounding, and easily understandable tones of the deity, because she herself is not divine. As one whose voice has been chosen to speak for a higher power, however, the purification of her body and soul allow her to blend boundaries into a unique hybrid of young and old, mortal and divine, bride and groom, woman and man. The prophetess's

⁹⁷ Sissa, 29.

⁹⁸ Sissa, 32.

purity, as well as her closeness to divinity, allows for the conflation of many “normal” human boundaries.

Another famous oracle that Herodotus recounts displays a slightly different side of the Pythia. The Athenians are worried about the impending war with the Persians. Xerxes is marching towards Athens, but his eyes, according to Herodotus, are set on the entirety of Greece (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 6.139). An envoy is sent to Delphi in supplication, but the response is less than encouraging—“λιπῶν φεῦγ’ ἔσχατα γαίης/ δώματα καὶ πόλιος” (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 6.140). Flee, leaving your homes and city, to the ends of the earth!

Rather than accept the oracle of doom that has been given to them, the Athenian envoys return again the next day, this time with palm branches and a threat to not leave the temple until given useful advice. The Pythia delivers an oracle that seems to hold better tidings, but in the tradition of Delphi, is still cryptic.

οὐ δύναται Παλλὰς Δί’ Ὀλύμπιον ἐξιλάσασθαι
λίσσομένη πολλοῖσι λόγοις καὶ μήτιδι πυκνῇ.
σοὶ δὲ τόδ’ αὖτις ἔπος ἐρέω ἀδάμαντι πελάσσας.
τῶν ἄλλων γὰρ ἀλίσκομένων ὅσα Κέκροπος οὖρος
ἐντὸς ἔχει κευθμῶν τε Κιθαιρῶνος ζαθέιο,
τείχος Τριτογενεῖ ξύλινον διδοῖ εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς
μοῦνον ἀπόρθητον τελέθειν, τὸ σὲ τέκνα τ’ ὀνήσει.
μηδὲ σύ γ’ ἵπποσύνην τε μένειν καὶ πεζὸν ἰόντα
πολλὸν ἀπ’ ἠπείρου στρατὸν ἤσυχος, ἀλλ’ ὑποχωρεῖν
νῶτον ἐπιστρέψας: ἔτι τοι ποτε κἀντίος ἔσση.
ὦ θείη Σαλαμῖς, ἀπολεῖς δὲ σὺ τέκνα γυναικῶν
ἢ που σκιδναμένης Δημήτερος ἢ συνιούσης.

(Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.142)

Translated, this reads:

Pallas cannot calm Olympian Zeus,
beseeching with many words and close counsel.
I bid you again a word having been made firm with adamant.

When all others whom the boundary of Cecrops holds within are
captured, and from the clefts of sacred Cithaeron,
Wide-Faced Zeus gives a wooden wall to the Triton-Born
only counted to be undestroyed for you and your children.
But do not wait quiet for those coming by foot and on horse,
the great army from the land, but retire back before turning
forwards. You will still be opposite at some point.
O godly Salamis! You will destroy the children of women one day
Either in the dispersion of Demeter, or the ingathering.

Much about this oracle resonates with the previous one. It, like all other Delphic oracles, is in hexameter. Several different subjects are addressed in it—the woe of the Athenian, the deadliness of Salamis, the wooden wall, and most importantly, the Pythia’s place in Pallas’ confrontation with Zeus. The end of this tale is well known—the oracle is brought back to Athens, where various men attempt to interpret it. Some believe that the “wooden wall” refers to the hedge of thorns that used to surround the Acropolis—others take heart in the idea that the strength of Athens is in her ships, and believe that the metaphorical wooden wall is instead a line of ships, impassable and invincible. The debate rages for some time, but eventually Themistocles, an Athenian general, reinterprets the oracle to say that not only will Athens be successful against the Persians if they use their navy, they will also defeat the cruel people of Salamis. Eventually, they go to war, and through the strength of their navy (and supposedly the grace of the gods), defeat the Persians.

The aspect of this oracle that most interests me, however, is the way in which the Pythia places herself between the quarrels of Pallas Athena and Zeus. “I bid you again....” Is this phrase from the mouth of Apollo, or the mind of the Pythia? Again, as with the verbs of knowing, perceiving, and hearing in the last oracle, it is impossible to separate their identities. Apollo and his priestess inhabit the same earthly space, namely,

the body of the Pythia. What one is saying the other says, so even if it is Apollo who recounts the scene of Athena attempting to console and calm her father, the Pythia experiences it as well.

Even though she is supposedly in a mantic, frenzied trance state, the Pythia is still somehow conscious enough to realize that the men in front of her are the same who approached her previously, asking for a different response to the same question. She does not become inflamed with anger—rather, she paints a scene of the domestic trouble occurring on Olympus, a privileged vision that she can only receive from the deity who inhabits her. Her position as Apollo's mouthpiece allows her to see this scene, and it is her virginity and purity that transmit it to the people in front of her.

Again, we see a side of the struggle for identity that happens upon the Pythia's body. She presents herself in a context that only allows her to be understood with Apollo. Otherwise, she would never see a scene on Olympus. However, she is also aware of her surroundings in the shrine—cognizant of the fact that the men plying her with palm boughs are indeed the same ones who came to her before. It is both her humanity and her proximity to the deity that place her in such a unique position. Herodotus outlines the Pythia as a woman living outside of the normal realm of human experience, in a space where the extremes tend to become conflated. Inspiration, enthusiasm, passion, physicality—all of these have some place in her interpretation, and all help to create a slightly deeper understanding of how her identity is in many ways the battle itself, manifesting upon her body.

Other authors have spoken of the Pythia and recorded her voice in their writings. Many of these are not historical utterances, or even quasi-historical (as Fontenrose

describes the previous two),⁹⁹ but purely legendary or fictional. Aeschylus utilizes the Pythia as one of the characters in his play, *The Eumenides*. She is the first person to speak on the stage, and in addition to giving exposition, she identifies herself quite clearly. Strains of the physical battle for her identity are again visible in this speech, as well as the interior struggle with her place in the universe and even her sexuality.

The first part of her speech places the Pythia as an heir to the line of mythical prophetesses at Delphi. The legendary history is recounted, moving from past time to the present day, and from female-dominated religious cults to the final, masculine one.

πρῶτον μὲν εὐχῆ τῆδε πρεσβεύω θεῶν 1
τὴν πρωτόμαντιν Γαῖαν: ἕκ δὲ τῆς Θέμιν,
ἣ δὴ τὸ μητρὸς δευτέρα τόδ' ἔζετο
μαντεῖον, ὡς λόγος τις: ἐν δὲ τῷ τρίτῳ
λάχει, θελούσης, οὐδὲ πρὸς βίαν τινός, 5
Τιτανίς ἄλλη παῖς Χθονὸς καθέζετο,
Φοίβη: δίδωσι δ' ἣ γενέθλιον δόσιν
Φοῖβω: τὸ Φοίβης δ' ὄνομα ἔχει παρώνυμον.

(Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, 1-8)

Language and meter combine here to create a Delphic prophecy similar to the ones we have seen previously. Tragedy is written in iambic trimeter, which is related to dactylic hexameter. For example, it still has six feet per line. With that association in mind, the translation reads:

First, in my prayer, I place Gaia as the first of the gods
and the first prophetess. From her was Themis,
who indeed was the second to sit in the prophecy
of her mother, as the word is to some. In the third
portion, willingly, and not through some violence,
another Titaness, daughter of the earth, sat down—
Phoebe, and she gave it to Phoebos for a birthday
gift: and he took his name from Phoebe.

⁹⁹ Fontenrose 305, 317.

A simple reading shows that the Pythia is obviously speaking in the first person—she is speaking about her office, her progenitors, and even referring to the god who inspires her in the third person. There is no collapse of identity visible here, or even a hint of the subsumption that the ambiguity of words like “οἶδα” (“I know”) and ἀκούω (“I hear”) give us in Herodotus. The rest of her speech, however, does reveal a certain amount of self-awareness surrounding this division, both of her office as a prophetess and of the unique relationship that she and Apollo have. Understanding the Greek literally, the Pythia and Apollo work together. She follows as he leads, creating an image reminiscent of the Greek husband and wife in their wedding ceremony.

καλοῦσα καὶ τέλειον ὕψιστον Δία,
 ἔπειτα μάντις ἐς θρόνους καθιζάνω.
 καὶ νῦν τυχεῖν με τῶν πρὶν εἰσόδων μακρῶ 30
 ἄριστα δοῖεν: κεί παρ’ Ἑλλήνων τινές,
 ἴτων πάλῳ λαχόντες, ὡς νομίζεται.
 μαντεύομαι γὰρ ὡς ἂν ἡγῆται θεός.

(Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, 28-33).

Calling upon most high Zeus, the perfected,
 so I take my seat, a prophetess upon the throne.
 And now let them give me the best fortune in greatness
 much better than my past entrances; if some of the Hellenes
 are present, he should come by helmet-lot, as it is considered.
 For I am made to prophesy as the god leads.

Apollo leads her as she is seated upon the prophetic throne (the tripod). He is not competing with her, or fighting her, or even fully within her—but at the same time as she is seated, he is also able to lead her through the realms and shady pathways of prophecy. This exhibits a dual consciousness—or at the very least, knowledge on the Pythia’s part that she moves with the deity as she stays upon her throne. The fact that she remains on her throne, as we shall see, is crucial to her ability to prophesy, and her identification as

prophetess of Apollo. Through the importance of this imagery, we shall see how the idea of the Pythia's throne clarifies another aspect of the prophetesses we have examined up to this point.

Wormell and Parke begin to treat this idea in their discussion of the tripod. It is widely accepted that she was seated upon it, from both evidence in both art and literature.¹⁰⁰ The tripod was a symbol of sacrifice that came to represent religious ritual itself, and eventually, through an extended association with Apollo, was known almost exclusively as his symbol. "Proper contact with Apollo's tripod was supposed in itself to inspire,"¹⁰¹ they write, realizing that the Pythia's physical location in the seat had something important to do with her prophetic ability.¹⁰²

Another important aspect of this passage is the actual word the Pythia uses to describe her state. She says *μᾶντεύομαι*, "I am made to prophesy." Quite literally, this can also be translated as "I am cast into the prophetic state"—the prophetic state being *μᾶντεία*, as discussed in the introduction. The verb is spoken not in the active voice, but rather in the middle/passive. The Pythia does not prophecy herself—she is either made to prophesy (middle voice) or cast into prophecy (passive voice).

Sissa points out that, in *The Eumenides*, the Pythia is unable to speak knowledgably when separated from her sacred seat. Immediately after the scene that was previously discussed, the Pythia enters the temple of Apollo (whom she calls *Loxias*, the crooked or ambiguous one) only to exit screaming. She has seen Orestes, whom she does

¹⁰⁰ Parke, 24.

¹⁰¹ Parke, 25

¹⁰² The rest of their argument, however, is rather racist and ethnocentrist.

not know, and the Erinyes, who are chasing him. She is, however, entirely unable to identify either.

ἔγῳ μὲν ἔρπω πρὸς πολυστεφῆ μυχόν:
ὀρῶ δ' ἐπ' ὀμφαλῷ μὲν ἄνδρα θεομυσῆ 40
ἔδραν ἔχοντα προστρόπαιον, αἵματι
στάζοντα χεῖρας καὶ νεοσπαδῆς ξίφος
ἔχοντ' ἐλαίας θ' ὑπιγέννητον κλάδον,
λήνει μεγίστῳ σωφρόνως ἔστεμμένον,
ἀργῆτι μαλλῶ: τῆδε γὰρ τρανῶς ἐρῶ. 45
πρόσθεν δὲ τάνδρὸς τοῦδε θαυμαστὸς λόχος
εὔδει γυναικῶν ἐν θρόνοισιν ἤμενος.
οὔτοι γυναικας, ἀλλὰ Γοργόνας λέγω,
οὔδ' αὔτε Γοργείοισιν εἰκάσω τύποις.

(Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, 39-49).

The Pythia says, as she crawls out of the temple:

And so I creep towards the wreath-bedecked sanctum:
I saw against the navel-stone a god-hated man
dwelling in the sanctuary of the suppliants, dripping
blood on his hands and holding a newly drawn
sword, and a young shoot of olives born on high,
moderately stuffed with a tuft of fleece,
a shining wool: for all this, I speak clearly.
And before this man, a marvelous ambush of women
was sleeping, sitting on the thrones.
Definitely not women, but I call them Gorgons:
But I cannot compare them to Gorgon forms, either.

Had the god been within her and inspiring her, as she insists that he does, it is safe to assume that the Pythia would have been able to identify the “god-hated man” as Orestes, and the three non-Gorgons, non-women as the Erinyes, or Furies. She is, however, put into a terrible state of fear by the sight of both, and entirely unable to fully identify them. What is interesting, though, is that she makes an effort to place both of them. Even though she does not know his name, she knows that Orestes is god-hated, just as she knows the Erinyes are vengeful without knowing exactly who they are.

Regardless of whether or not Apollo is currently inspiring her, her identity as a prophetess still exists: her knowledge is still far beyond a normal mortal's. It is the tripod, however, that augments this knowledge and power, and it is from her tripod that the Pythia is absent. "Away from the tripod, forced to rely on her intelligence alone, she knows nothing and sinks into confusion."¹⁰³

The tripod does not represent divine contact in and of itself, however. It represents an idea that reflects directly onto conceptions about women, sexuality, and gender, and how their bodies are spaces that create prophecy. Giulia Sissa makes a very strong argument for this association—in order to apply her conclusions to mine, I will first (briefly) outline her main points.¹⁰⁴

In antiquity, diseases of the uterus (which, according to the Hippocratic texts, were most diseases) were commonly treated by the wafting of vapors into the vaginal cavity. Various ingredients would be burned, and the patient would place herself over the fumes in order to ingest them. This image resembles the image of the Pythia posed on her tripod¹⁰⁵, receiving the vapors of the earth and going into a mantic trance. The Pythia and the afflicted woman are seated on a vessel that is normally used in cooking and associated with heat.¹⁰⁶ It is on this vessel that something foreign enters their bodies through the same passage through which they can be impregnated. This speaks to the

¹⁰³ Sissa, 19.

¹⁰⁴ See Sissa, pages 45-52 for the argument in its entirety: I am only using the points that are relevant to my thesis, but striving to maintain the integrity of her writing as I do so.

¹⁰⁵ There has been much scholarly debate over the presence of enthusiastic fumes at Delphi. Regardless of whether or not they existed, the *idea* of them is well documented in antiquity, and as I am discussing the Pythia in light of literary tradition, it makes no difference whether or not they actually existed, so long as they were believed to.

¹⁰⁶ Aristotle, *On the Generation of Creatures*.

idea that the female body is soft and malleable, like a sponge—an idea found in many medical texts of the time.¹⁰⁷

This is the imagery that Aeschylus writes into the Pythia's speech, and it is ultimately the link between the prophetess' tripod throne and her prophecy. The body of the prophetess is crucial to her identity as a human, a divine vessel, and one who speaks with the voice of a deity. The fact that prophecy can enter her form in such a way is the simultaneous material nature of her womanhood and the necessity of spoken prophecy. She is not hard as the perfected man's body should be—but it is this imperfection that allows her to bear prophecy, receive *enthousiasmos*, and ultimately commune with the god.

The scene of the Pythia on her tripod can be laid over several comparanda from the classical world. The Sibyl and Deborah both sat upon their prophetic thrones, either at Cumae or under a palm tree, receiving the supplications of whomever came to them in need. The Pythia especially is associated with a specific piece of the natural world, residing in the temple of Apollo at Delphi.¹⁰⁸ Various Sibyls, in addition, have their own locations, temples, and shrines.¹⁰⁹ Deborah seated under her palm was an image so associated with ancient Israel that it made its way onto a coin minted by Vespasian in 71 CE. In the *Capta Judaea* coin series, Judaea is almost always represented as a subdued woman sitting under a date palm—a violent co-opting of an important cultural image.

The Pythia stands both as one figure in our arc of ancient prophetesses. When taken in context with her antecedents and descendents, the mists that surround their

¹⁰⁷ Sissa, 49.

¹⁰⁸ Fontenrose, 1.

¹⁰⁹ E.g., the Cumaean and Tiburtine Sibyls.

personas begin to coalesce a little more: we begin to see bodies, the actual bodies of women, as part of the vessel that speaks for a god. Deborah's palm tree becomes a little clearer, as does the prophetic seat that Miriam may have occupied at Kadesh. We begin to understand the importance of physicality in the transmission of a divinity's words, and why some actions, like dancing or communal responses, are an integral part of the prophetic experience. Most importantly, however, it begins to become clear (and will become clearer) that prophecy is an action that is unable to be divorced from its inherent physicality and relationship with femininity. Men, though they might gain repute and glory through prophesying, continually display the need to justify their presence in a prophetess' world.

Chapter 5 Tangled in the Nets of Men: Cassandra (Κασσανδρα)

Perhaps the best known of all prophetesses, Cassandra occupies a unique place in the study of these women. No other divinely inspired speaker provides such a detailed and specific account of the origin of prophecy—and no other makes the link between prophecy and the collapse of identity so palpably present. Through the assertion of her own sexual agency Cassandra loses credibility, even as she admits that it is her physicality—both her body and her sexual desire—which endowed her with the prophetic gift in the first place. Her gifts come from Apollo, and are presented as a result of the physical relationship she shares with him.

Cassandra appears in both the epic tradition and the tragic—one of the many reasons that her sad fate is so commonly known. She is present in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as a brief mention in Vergil's *Aeneid*. Many tragedians have included her in their plays, and several use her as the epitome of the “mad” prophetess: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Trojan Women* are the most prominent among them. Lycophron, the Hellenistic poet, is considered the author of a piece about Cassandra called *Alexandra*.¹¹⁰ Other authors mention her, all of them paying some sort of homage to her madness, her royalty, or her prophetic gifts.¹¹¹ Aeschylus is particularly helpful in showing how her sexuality is a double-edged blade, harming both herself and others as it simultaneously allows her to commune directly with a god.

¹¹⁰ According to several scholars, this poem is one of the hardest works of Greek literature, earning its putative author the title of Lycophron the Obscure.

¹¹¹ E.g., Apollodorus *Bibliothēke*, Vergil *Aeneid*.

I will focus first on the presence of Cassandra in the Homeric epics, as she is the only prophetess visible in these early works of Greek literature. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, even though it is a later work, provides the literary foundation from which to more clearly evaluate and analyze Cassandra's sexual relationship with Apollo—especially in relation to how it illuminates Apollo's subsumption of her identity. It is here that we see most clearly the depth of feeling that exists within a prophetess. The experience of possession, according to the character Cassandra, is divinely inspired while still being painful and earthly. It is the two mingled together within the confines of a physical body that create and define a prophetess. In Cassandra, we clearly see both sides of the battle that takes place.

For years, scholars have remarked that Cassandra's presence in the Homeric epics is not that of a prophetess, but that of a mourning princess of Troy. "Homer did not know her as a seeress," writes P.G. Mason, "or at any rate preferred to ignore it, for there is no reference in the Iliad to inspired prophecy and it is usual to assume that Homer disapproved of it."¹¹² This is a possibility, yes—but when the definition of prophetess that we have previously applied is used, there is no reason to doubt that Homer's Cassandra fulfills the same role.

For Mason, the terms "seeress" and "prophetess" are interchangeable. He identifies both with *προφητις* (*propheitis*) or *μάντις* (*mantis*), claiming that since both are used of Cassandra in later periods, both have similar meanings. As was explained earlier, I believe that *προφητις* refers to the aspect of a prophetess that speaks for

¹¹² P.G. Mason, "Kassandra," in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 79 (The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, 1959), 80-93.

divinity, and μαντις, because of its relationship with μανια, focuses more on the physical, emotional, and ultimately “mantic” act of prophecy.¹¹³ Homer¹¹⁴ might not have seen Cassandra as a seeress, as one who prophesies the future. I propose, however, that she was regarded as one who spoke with the voice of the deity. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Cassandra does indeed speak before, in front of, or on behalf of someone else. She prophesies.

Cassandra’s first appearance in the *Iliad* is delayed until the very end of the last book. She maintains a position of power as one of the last characters to speak, and her speech itself is developed as a very moving, very mournful keening for the death of her brother Hector.

οὐδέ τις ἄλλος
ἔγνω πρόσθ’ ἀνδρῶν καλλιζώνων τε γυναικῶν,
ἀλλ’ ἄρα Κασσάνδρη ἰκέλη χρυσηῆ Ἀφροδίτῃ
Πέργαμον εἰσαναβάσα φίλον πατέρ’ εἰσενόησεν
ἔσταότ’ ἐν δίφρῳ, κήρυκά τε ἀστυβοώτην:
τὸν δ’ ἄρ’ ἐφ’ ἡμιόνων ἴδε κείμενον ἐν λεχέεσσι:
κῶκυσέν τ’ ἄρ’ ἔπειτα γέγωνέ τε πᾶν κατὰ ἄστυ:
ὄψεσθε Τρῶες καὶ Τρωάδες Ἕκτορ’ ἰόντες,
εἴ ποτε καὶ ζῶντι μάχης ἐκνοστήσαντι
χαίρετ’, ἐπεὶ μέγα χάρμα πόλει τ’ ἦν παντί τε δήμῳ.
(Homer, *Iliad* 24: 697-706)

Translated, this reads:

Nor did any other
know, whether it was a man or a beautifully-breasted woman,
but Cassandra, like Golden Aphrodite
having gone up into Pergamon, saw her own father
standing in the chariot, and the herald calling throughout the city,
the other one lying upon the bed
and she wailed then, and made herself heard to all in the city,
“As you come, you shall behold, Trojan men and women, Hector--

¹¹³ See Introduction.

¹¹⁴ Or whoever may have composed these epics...

even if while living you delighted in his return
from war, since he was a great joy to the city and the entire people.”

The most important facet of this quote is, of course, the actual statement that Cassandra utters. It is not a prophecy that tells the future—but neither is the bulk of Deborah’s song, or Miriam’s, or even much of what the Pythia says. It is an injunction to the people of Troy to mourn the passing of their beloved prince. It is not uncommon for prophetesses and prophets to command their nations to mourn¹¹⁵—it happens to quite often in the Hebrew bible, and even, to some extent, with the Pythia’s pronouncements. Taken in context with Cassandra’s position of authority, both figurative (as a princess) and literal (her location on the heights of Pergamon), this statement can easily be believed as a prophetic utterance, spoken by one who is inspired by divinity, “like Golden Aphrodite.”

The comparison to Aphrodite in *Iliad* 24.699 is not arbitrary, nor can it be overlooked when examining a woman who exists in almost every other tradition as an inspired prophetess. The metaphors and similes in Homer almost always serve to advance the plot in some way, and to inform the reader about a certain, new aspect of a character or object.¹¹⁶ With this in mind, there is something crucial about Cassandra that her comparison to Aphrodite tells us.

As I interpret the simile, it can be taken one of two ways. Both are readily apparent, as the similes in Homer, while often indicative of deep character traits, were not

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Jeremiah or Ezekiel.

¹¹⁶ Jonathan L. Ready, “The Comparative Spectrum in Homer,” in *The American Journal of Philology* (Baltimore, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) 453-496.

intended to stymie the epic audience.¹¹⁷ What is the significance of Aphrodite in this context? Firstly, she is a goddess. Not only that, but she is a “golden” goddess. While “golden” is a common epithet for many Homeric divinities,¹¹⁸ it is semantically quite close to one in particular: Phoibos Apollo, the shining sun god. Even when Cassandra looks as beautiful as Aphrodite, she maintains a connection to Apollo through related meanings and comparisons. In addition, the scene of Cassandra is standing atop Pergamon, either bathed in or emitting golden light (or both) and speaking for the entire city to hear is filled with divine imagery. Not anyone could do so with such conviction—and Cassandra’s gifts from both Apollo and Aphrodite help this to happen. Aphrodite is also, of course, the goddess of love and carnal passion. It is sexuality, as has been discussed previously, that forms a basis for divine inspiration—and in Cassandra’s case (as well as many others), this sexuality is based on an actual sexual (or sexually termed) relationship with a divinity.

The *Odyssey* does not have such a weighty mention of Cassandra—her name appears once. What does stand out, even so, is that Agamemnon mentions her voice, and her startling, mournful cry. “οἰκτροτάτην δ’ ἤκουσα ὄπα Πριάμοιο θυγατρὸς, Κασσάνδρης” (Homer, *Odyssey* 11.422). “And the most pitiful voice I heard was Cassandra’s, daughter of Priam.” Amidst the carnage, destruction, and death brought about by Agamemnon’s wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, what stands out is the tragic voice of Cassandra the prophetess. Even in death her identity cannot be

¹¹⁷ Ready, 460.

¹¹⁸ Paolo Vivante, *The Epithets in Homer: A study in poetic values* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982), 59.

suppressed by mortals.¹¹⁹ Cassandra acts as a prophetess in the *Iliad*, making known the voice of divinity. I would contend that the preoccupation with the very sound of her voice marks her as one who speaks from the immortal realm in the *Odyssey* as well.¹²⁰

Both these references, however, pale in comparison to how Aeschylus treats her in his *Agamemnon*. A great amount of attention will be given to this play for two main reasons. Firstly, it is one of the only places where the prophetess describes the actual experience of *enthousiasmos*, in which divinity takes hold of her body and forces it to birth a prophecy. Secondly, Cassandra gives an accounting of her history with Apollo which emphasizes even more the inherent physicality of her prophetic experience.

Cassandra is on the stage for most of the play, not unlike the chorus, a silent witness to the growing horror and atrocity that culminates in her death. In a scene that many (if not most) commentators have deemed the play's climax,¹²¹ Cassandra finally speaks. She first converses with the chorus, which becomes more and more involved in the process of her prophecy. Eventually she is both trapped in the throes of madness and rage, and inspired by Apollo. The reader comes to see that these things are the same—it is Apollo's presence within her that drives her insane and causes her to lose all sense of

¹¹⁹ Cassandra's relation to tragic words, specifically the vocalizations of crying, keening, and wailing, is a huge subject that cannot be undertaken here (although I am relatively confident that it would, in some ways, support my argument). In almost every reference to Cassandra that I have seen, she is described first with a word relating her to the ultimate tragedy of an untimely and gruesome death. To some extent, I believe this plays with her prophetic nature.

¹²⁰ I realize that much of the work I have done attempting to prove that Homer's Cassandra is a prophetess seems somewhat cursory—again, this is a project that I am interested in following to its logical conclusion, as I am convinced that it has great bearing on how we think of prophetesses and those who speak for the divine.

¹²¹ Anne Lebeck, *The Oresteia: a study in language and structure* (Cambridge, the Harvard University Press, 1971), 52.

identity. Perhaps Mason phrased it most clearly in his seminal article: “the god who directs her is her destroyer.”¹²² Like the Pythia, she follows as the god leads. In her case, however, the god leads to death and pain while inhabiting her physically. This inhabitation is surrounded with the language of sexuality, making it clear that it is Apollo’s desire for Cassandra’s virginity that creates her prophetic identity while it simultaneously subsumes it. Through a close reading of the text, this only becomes more and more apparent.

The climactic scene begins with a lament. “ὄτοτοτοῖ πόποι δᾶ/Ἔπολλον Ἔπολλον” (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1072.). O, what woe! What woe indeed! O Apollo, O Apollo! The chorus rejects her, saying that “τί ταῦτ’ ἀνωτότυξας ἀμφὶ Λοξίου;/οὐ γὰρ τοιοῦτος ὥστε θρηνητοῦ τυχεῖν” (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1074-5). Why have you broken out into wails for the ambiguous one? He is not the type of god to deal with mourners. After a brief stichomythia in which Cassandra is only able to utter increasingly pathetic cries of woe, the truth becomes apparent.

“Ἄπολλον Ἄπολλον/ἀγυιᾶτ’, ἀπόλλων ἐμός./ἀπώλεσας γὰρ οὐ μόνις τὸ δεύτερον” (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1080-1082). Apollo, Apollo, street-guarder destroying me, you have destroyed me absolutely for the second time. The wordplay that is present here, like in Miriam’s complaint before YHWH, subtly informs the reader about the nature of Cassandra’s relationship with Apollo. It is inherently destructive—not only is he (Apollo) currently destroying her (ἀπόλλων/*apolloon*), but he has already done so in the past (ἀπώλεσας/*apolesas*). The inherent violence of this association remains at the forefront of the mind when interpreting the rest of this text,

¹²² Mason, 85.

especially Cassandra’s speech. As the chorus says, “μένει τὸ θεῖον δουλίᾳ περ ἔν φρενί” (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1084). “Divinity remains even in the enslaved soul.” Apollo has “Apolloized” her—not only has she been destroyed, as signified by the play on Ἄπολλον/ ἀπόλλων, but he has literally inserted himself into her—a simultaneous act of physical sexuality and destruction.

Cassandra and the chorus continue their exchange as the scene progresses. Much is revealed about how Cassandra is viewed; in one heart-wrenching line, the chorus admits that, as famous a prophetess as she is, Mycene has no need of her (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1099). What uncovers the most about the struggle that Cassandra undergoes, however, is her own, longer speech as she proceeds move more drastically between cogency and prophecy.¹²³ In line 1156, after (quite accurately) predicting the deaths of all she knows at the hands of Clytemnestra, she mourns her own imminent doom, conflating it with the act of prophecy that, as we have seen, has contributed to her tragic state.

ἰὼ γάμοι γάμοι Πάριδος ὀλέθριοι φίλων. 1156
 ἰὼ Σκαμάνδρου πάτριον ποτόν.
 τότε μὲν ἄμφι σὰς αἰόνας τάλαιν’
 ἠνυτόμαν τροφαῖς:
 νῦν δ’ ἄμφι Κωκυτόν τε κάχερουσίους 1160
 ὄχθας ἕοικα θεσπιωδήσειν τάχα·

¹²³ Many scholars would term Cassandra’s state at this point as “ecstatic.” I have chosen to stay away from this term—while it does carry within it notions of sexuality and extremity, its very meaning detracts from the critical connection between prophecy and the body. *Ἐκστασις* literally means “to be outside oneself,” and the prophecy that I am discussing comes partly from an outside divine source, but also a source that inhabits a space within the body. Plato’s discussion of ecstasy does indeed link madness, erotic ecstasy, prophecy, and poetic inspiration—ideas that are critically connected in this paper. My choice of using *Ἐνθουσιασμός* is largely one of semantics. For more information on ecstasy, see “Ecstasy” in *Brill’s New Pauly*, edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, volume 4, copyright 2004.

(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1156-1161)

Ah, the marriages, the marriages of Paris, destruction of his friends!
Ah, Scamander, my fathering river!
Then on both your banks I, wretched
was raised with nourishment—
And now, beside Cocytus and barley-bearing
banks, I think to soon prophesy.

From this utterance the reader continues to experience Cassandra's voice as intimately tied to both prophecy and death. Both are located in the limits of human experience, where the extremities of physicality become blurred with the extremities of mortality. The extremities of physicality exist for Cassandra in the human sexual experience, represented by Apollo's desire for her. In this case, that edge of experience is death, which is also the ultimate limit of mortality. Unfortunately for Cassandra, this comes all too soon.

Cassandra's connection to the world around her is quickly dissipating. She focuses more and more on the god within her, speaking frantically and forcefully, trying hard to make herself understood to the chorus. As she cries out against the loss of life that she knows is coming, she also fights against the subsumption of her own identity into Apollo's, and the total collapse of her self. Cassandra's struggle is evident within the phrasing of the next few lines.

καὶ μὴν ὁ χρησμὸς οὐκέτ' ἐκ καλυμμάτων
ἔσται δεδορκῶς νεογάμου νύμφης δίκην:
λαμπρὸς δ' ἔοικεν ἡλίου πρὸς ἀντολὰς
πνέων ἐσάξειν, ὥστε κύματος δίκην
κλύζειν πρὸς αὐγὰς τοῦδε πῆματος πολὺ
μεῖζον: φρενώσω δ' οὐκέτ' ἐξ ἀίνιγμάτων.

(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1178-1183)

As the god moves within her, she cries:

And so! No longer will prophecy be peeking out
from behind veils, like the custom of a bride wedded newly:
it shall dart in, breathing, blazing, like the sun for its own rising
just like a wave dashing out the rays of a woe
much greater. I shall no longer enlighten through enigmas.

As beautiful as her language is, it illuminates one of the central problems of her condition. Prophecy is both the glorious gift that Apollo has given her, and that which separates her from others. It is great and beautiful, just like the sun—but just as humans cannot fully appreciate the sun’s power without being entirely consumed, so Apollo’s gift utterly destroys Cassandra. Her use of words like “dart” and “blazing” give the reader some sense of the violence with which Apollo inhabits her. This is not the calm enthusiasm of the Pythia, but a forceful occupation of her body and faculties. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is Cassandra’s usage of the word “breathing” to describe the prophecy. As the reader will see, the idea of breath and breathing was closely tied to the divine sexual act—just as the Muses breathed poetry into Hesiod’s womb, Apollo is breathing his prophecy into Cassandra.

No discussion of this scene is complete without an examination of the next few lines, in which Cassandra details the history of her relationship to Apollo. The chorus begins asking her questions to draw out the facts of the tale, and slowly, bit by bit, the reader realizes just how much of Cassandra’s identity is at stake. The first statement is obvious. “μάντις μ’ Ἀπόλλων τῷδ’ ἐπέστησεν τέλει” (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1202). Prophetic Apollo established me in this position. The reader is already aware of this—why else would she be calling out to the god? The chorus seems to know this as well, and their next question is much more to the point. They ask about the nature of Apollo’s appointment of Cassandra, which simultaneously seems to cast

doubt on Cassandra's inherent value as a prophetess. This doubt is inherently linked to Cassandra's identity itself. To doubt her as a prophetess is to doubt her as a woman, and to doubt her as a both is to doubt her as a human being.

“μῶν καὶ θεός περ ἰμέρω πεπληγμένος;” (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1204). And surely—the god was struck with longing? The chorus implies that Cassandra's beauty is the root of her prophecy—why else would Apollo have chosen her? Their minds immediately jump to what can only be a natural conclusion: the reason behind Apollo's gift was sexual. This line advances two aspects of this thesis. Primarily, it highlights the underlying sexual nature of prophecy. Beyond that, however, it also shows Cassandra's reduction to a sexualized female, which denies her the greater part of her identity. Almost worse than that—Cassandra confirms this reduction, because her identity has been pulled in so many different directions that it cannot actually exist on its own any more. We see more than a prophetess' body as a battleground here. We also see the prophetess losing the battle for her own body.

Κασάνδρα: ἀλλ' ἦν παλαιστῆς κάρτ' ἐμοὶ πνέων χάριν.
Χορός: ἢ καὶ τέκνων εἰς ἔργον ἤλθετον νόμῳ;
Κασάνδρα: ξυναινέσασα Λοξίαν ἐψευσάμην.
Χορός: ἤδη τέχναισιν ἐνθέοις ἠρημένη;
Κασάνδρα: ἤδη πολίταις πάντ' ἐθέσπιζον πάθη. 1210
Χορός: πῶς δῆτ' ἀνατος ἦσθα Λοξίου κότῳ;
Κασάνδρα: ἔπειθον οὐδέν' οὐδέν, ὡς τάδ' ἤμπλακον.
(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1206-1212)

The remainder of the scene reads as follows:

Cassandra: But he was such a suitor, breathing grace upon me.
Chorus: And did you then go into the way of children, as is the custom?
Cassandra: Having joined him in praise—I tricked the ambiguous one.
Chorus: Were you already taken by the god-containing art?
Cassandra: Already I was prophesying to all the citizens.
Chorus: How then were you unharmed by the ambiguous one's anger?

Cassandra: I convinced no one! No one, since I made the mistake.

Upon reading these lines, it becomes evident that several forces are at work, and that Cassandra's history with Apollo encompasses several different aspects of sexuality and feminine prophecy. I will outline them as they occur in the text, but the interpretations lurking behind these lines are myriad, and can be taken in as many directions as there are interpreters. I believe, however, that on some level, all of them point to a few basic themes.

In the first line of this section, the connection between sexuality and breath is highlighted. This is the same sort of language with which the Muses inspired Hesiod, and almost the exact same language with which Zeus impregnated Io in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* (Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*, 18). Breathing and speaking are necessary to the act of prophecy—remember, in the ancient imagination, the Pythia became inspired both as the fumes entered her vagina, and as she breathed them in through her nose. Apollo's act of breath is a dual action signifying his sexual conquest of Cassandra (or at least his intended sexual conquest), and his gift of prophecy within her.

The other denigrating aspect of Apollo's "gift," of course, is that no one believes Cassandra's prophecy. Eventually, the chorus claims to, but the people to whom she speaks and whom she tries to save from death do not believe her. The rejection of her prophecy serves as an outward rejection of her identity, and another reminder that Apollo is destroying her as she speaks. Ultimately, she realizes that it is not the actions of the chorus, nor even the belief of the population that affects and affirms her identity. The battle that takes place on her body is an internal one, and the only way to fully win is to prove to herself her own prophetic value. By producing a prophecy that will be seen as

truthful no matter what, Cassandra will win the struggle for her identity that takes place upon her body. Cassandra divests herself of her prophetic vestments, knowing that their worth is limited.

τί δῆτ' ἑμαυτῆς καταγέλωτ' ἔχω τάδε,
καὶ σκῆπτρα καὶ μαντεῖα περὶ δέρη στέφῃ; 1265
σὲ μὲν πρὸ μοίρας τῆς ἐμῆς διαφθερῶ.
(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1264-1266)

Why do I still have these things, mockeries of myself?
This wand, these prophet-markers, the chain around my throat—
I destroy you before my own fate!

No longer are they the necessary markers of her identity. They are the chains that bind her to this world, to the chorus, and to the pain that living and prophesying has become. Cassandra realizes that only in her admission of defeat can she defeat the god and be free—only when her divinely bestowed breath stops will the divinely given madness and pain end with it. To that end, she marches into the temple and to the doom she knows is coming. The ultimate end of human experience becomes, for Cassandra, the final affirmation of her own identity.

Ἄιδου πύλας δὲ τάσδ' ἐγὼ προσεννέπω:
ἐπεύχομαι δὲ καιρίας πληγῆς τυχεῖν,
ὡς ἀσφάδαστος, αἰμάτων εὐθνησίμων
ἀπορρυέντων, ὄμμα συμβάλω τόδε. 1295
(Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1291-1295)

As she marches to the end of her life, Cassandra's final words are:

I call upon these gates as if they were Hades'
and I pray to be struck a completing blow
so that without convulsion, as my blood is flowing out
into an easy death, I may bring my eyes together.

As it can so often be in the culmination of a tragedy, death is a sweet release. For Cassandra, this is a release not only from the travails that the Trojan War has brought upon her, but a release from the clutches of an angry god and jilted would-be lover. She prophesies to her last moments, again affirming her own worth and value as a prophetess. Cassandra is different from the other prophetesses in this main respect. Divine inspiration is a point of contention and danger for them all, but only for Cassandra does it end in the tragedy of death.

In Aeschylus' and Homer's Cassandra we see a woman who demands an identity of her own, but is incapable of defining herself apart from the god who wishes to be her lover. Her rejection of Apollo reflects this. Having already been given the ability to prophesy, she is irrevocably bound to him—and yet, by rejecting him, there is still some tiny part of her identity that is able to remain her own. Her body is such a violent battleground that it eventually has no choice but to fail her. Cassandra dies, remaining in memory as a woman who spoke for Apollo, defied the roles set for her, and foretold her own doom.

Chapter 6 Do Not Consign Your Words to Leaves: The Sibyl (Ἡ Σιβυλλὰ)

The Sibyl is both one of the earliest and latest of our prophetesses, with potential origins reaching back earlier than the Pythia's, and traditions reaching as late as the Christian tradition. Her appearances in literature are numerous, and like Cassandra, she exists in both poetry and prose. She is a figure revered by many ancient traditions, and with pagan, Jewish, and Christian authors writing her into their own stories, she is the perfect woman to conclude this survey.

The popularity of the Sibyl and the amount of literature that has been written about her mean that careful selections must be made when exploring her incarnations through the lens of sacred text. Her presence in three works will form the basic outline of this section. While there is obviously much more literature involving her, it is my opinion that these three give the broadest view of her prophetic identity. They also, as examples of both Classical and non-Classical prophecy, help to show the evolution of feminine prophecy in the later stages of antiquity.

The first text is the *Oracula Sibyllina*, a collection of twelve¹²⁴ books of oracles written from the second century BCE to the seventh century CE, and compiled by a Byzantine monk around that time.¹²⁵ The books are variously redacted by Jewish, Christian, and pagan authors, each of them emphasizing different aspects of the Sibyl's

¹²⁴ There are only twelve books in the *Oracula Sibyllina*, but they are numbered up to fourteen—books nine and ten are missing.

¹²⁵ John. J. Collins, "The Sibylline Oracles," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed James Charlesworth, (Garden City, Doubleday and Company, 1983 by Double and Company), 322.

prophetic and feminine identity. Their study is difficult because of the layered nature of the text, but with selections from a few books, the Sibyl's connection to other prophetesses of the ancient Mediterranean will be clear. Vergil also pays his respects to the Sibyl. In the *Aeneid's* book VI, Aeneas has an important encounter with the Sibyl at Cumae, who eventually serves as his guide in the underworld.¹²⁶ The Sibyl speaks several prophecies, but interestingly, her main function is to guide Aeneas to his father and serve as a guide on the descent into Hades. Again, the changing roles of the prophetess-Sibyl become more and more visible, as will be shown by a much closer reading of this section. Finally, Ovid also recounts a story about the Sibyl. This one, more than any other, connects her to Cassandra and on the nature of her relationship with Apollo, as well as highlighting her body. In return for the promise of her virginity, she is bestowed with an almost eternal lifespan—but as the text shows, she eventually turns into an old crone and a shriveled voice, spending the bulk of her years beyond the age of childbearing.¹²⁷

I must make an important distinction before continuing with the Sibyl's literary appearances. Much of the literature in which she appears—specifically the *Oracula Sibyllina*, is a type of literature known as *apocalypse*, and not classical prophecy. In his book *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, Shaye Cohen describes the development of apocalypse during the Hellenistic period. “By the second century BCE, classical

¹²⁶ Vergil, *Aeneid*, vi.263.

¹²⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, xiv.130-153.

prophecy had ceased; seers who saw visions and hearers who heard voices instead wrote *apocalypses*. ”¹²⁸

The most glaring difference between prophecy and apocalypse is the manner in which the “revelation” is delivered or framed. A prophecy, as we have previously learned, is the result of a human instrument speaking with the voice of a deity. The prophetess is physically inhabited by the divine--whether sexually or spiritually, it does not matter. The voice that emanates from her mouth is not her own, and the message that she gives is a direct quotation from divinity. Perhaps most importantly, her body serves as a vessel for revelation, with prophecy gestating inside her until she births it.

An apocalypse, on the other hand, is literally an “uncovering.”¹²⁹ The word comes from *αποκαλυπτω*, a verb meaning “to reveal” or “to discover.” A divine or heavenly figure reveals a secret to a human, who then either writes it down or otherwise shares it with the greater community.¹³⁰ Instead of operating as the physical manifestation of the divine voice, the human figure is simply an intermediary, transmitting a message that has in turn be transmitted to him or her (most often, also, by an angel or some other celestial creature and not a high or “supreme” divinity). This is not to say that Sibyls are not prophetesses in some respects, and I am also certainly not implying that as apocalypse gains prominence, prophetesses die out all together.

¹²⁸ Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 187.

¹²⁹ Liddell, 201.

¹³⁰ Cohen, 187; Collins, 317 and following.

Sibyls appear in many legends and were long a literary subject. Varro, a Roman grammarian and historian of the first century BCE,¹³¹ lists ten of them, whom we learn of from a list compiled by Lactantius.¹³² The Romans and early Christians had important relationships with two in particular, the Tiburtine and the Cumaean. Another is known as the “Hebrew Sibyl,” while still others are testified in Classical Greek sources. The *Oracula Sibyllina* represent a huge range of authors, social settings, theological views, and poetic personae. They are incredibly layered, and full of a literary depth that can be analyzed and explored for years. I examine pieces of the *Oracula* in two different groupings: the texts that focus on the Sibyl’s body and link her to other prophetesses, and the texts that, while largely identified as apocalyptic, can still be seen within the range of an ancient Mediterranean prophetic arc.

At the end of Sib. Or. 2, the Sibyl identifies herself within the tradition of classical prophetesses. Books one and two are often considered a unit—though separated by a Christian redaction and a transitional “proem” at the beginning of book two, the arc and scope of both deals with the ten generations of the world and the wickedness of men.¹³³ (I will treat the introduction of Sib. Or. 1 shortly.) The short introductory piece at the beginning of Sib. Or. 2 presents the Sibyl as a figure who prophesies with her entire existence.

Ἡμος δὴ κατέπαυσε θεὸς πολυπάνσοφον ὤδῃν,
πολλὰ λιταζομένης, καί μοι πάλιν ἐν στήθεσιν
ἐνθετο θεσπεσίων ἑπέων πολυγηθεά φωνήν.
πᾶν δέμας ἐκπληχθεῖσα τάδ’ ἔσπομαι: οὐδὲ γὰρ οἶδα

¹³¹ “Varro,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 1582.

¹³² Varro, *Res Divinae*, 1.6.10

¹³³ Collins in Charlesworth, 330.

ἵοπτι λέγω, κέλεται δὲ θεὸς τὰ ἕκαστ'ἀγορεύειν.
(Sib. Or., 2.1-5)

When God stopped my wise-in-all-ways song,
as I was praying greatly, he again placed in my breast
the many-ways-delightful voice of wonderful words.
And I shall speak everything now from suffering and pleasure, for I do not
know
what it is I say, but God commands me to speak out each thing¹³⁴.

We can treat this in two ways. Firstly, it can be viewed as an interpolation into the main body of the text, following the heavily Christian end of Book One (which is a lengthy history of Christ¹³⁵) which acts as a transition back into the more Jewishly oriented Book Two. It can also be viewed as a part of the already extant text, one of the many fragments of a literary tradition that was eventually cobbled together to form the persona of the Sibyl within the pages of the *Oracula*.

Either interpretation tells us a great amount. If viewed as an interpolation, it serves to separate the more Christ-affirming message of the end of Sib. Or. 1 from the more apocalyptic and eschatological Sibyl of Sib. Or. 2. The later Sibyl who speaks through and of Christ is divorced from this Sibyl, who “speaks from suffering and pleasure.” A move away from the more bodily and physical nature of Sibylline prophecy into a purely apocalyptic vision is suggested, and in fact reinforced by the placement and wording of this fragment. We can see and hear the shift itself, and it will become clearer when the other excerpts are discussed.

When viewed as another fragment from the greater corpus of the Sibylline tradition, a different notion of the Sibyl arises. She is able to be seen a figure who

¹³⁴ *Oracula Sibyllina*, 2.1-5.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 1.324-400.

changes and evolves over time, but whose authority never wanes and whose voice cannot be silenced. Divorced from her physicality in one place, she is rife with it in another—these identifications signify changes over a long span of time, not necessarily different figures or different authors (even though different authors are likely in this case).¹³⁶

One important thing to notice, however, regardless of our interpretation of this passage's placement, is its treatment of the Sibyl's inspiration. God *places* (*ενθετο/entheto*) a voice within her chest—he does not speak out from her body himself. She is given the gift of prophecy by divinity, but does not experience the complete bodily possession that other prophetesses do. Of course, her prophecy still involves her whole body: the suffering and pleasure of *ἐκπληχθεῖσα/ekpleichtheisa*¹³⁷ imply it. Her body, however, is necessary for the delivery of prophecy. The Sibyl does not experience *enthousiasmos* in the same way that the Pythia does, or even the Hebrew prophetesses. She communicates with God so that he can give her instruction, but in this case he does not dwell within the confines of her body. Nevertheless, the prophecy inhabits her. Her identity is still the identity of a prophetic body. Her act of speech with the divinity still carries connotations that allow it to be linked to sexuality: remember, the acts of speech and breath were closely connected to impregnation.¹³⁸

At the beginning of Sib. Or. 3, we see one of the clearest depictions yet of the Sibyl's body as a battleground. A key aspect that unites many of the her appearances in the *Oracula* is her tendency to complain—either of her own unworthiness (which is rare),

¹³⁶ Jane L. Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

¹³⁷ Liddell, 517. From *ἐκπλήσσω*, which contains dual meanings of both “to strike out” and “to be frightened, amazed, astonished.” It is from these meanings that I (and John. J. Collins) derive the valence “suffering and pleasure.”

¹³⁸ Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women* 18.

or of her utter prophetic exhaustion (which is most common). This is evident in various parts of Sib. Or. One and Two, but becomes very visible in the introduction to Book Three. The exhaustion is both spiritual and physical—the battle for her identity is being waged both upon her skin and in her spirit.

Ἵψιβρεμέτα, μάχαρ, οὐράνιε, ὃς ἔχεις τὰ Χερουβίμ
ἰδρθμένος, λίτομαι, παναλθέα φημίξασαν
παῦσον βαιόν με. κέκμηκε γὰρ ἔνδοθεν ἦτορ.
ἀλλὰ τί μοι κραδίη πάλι πάλλεται ἡδέ γε θυμός
τυπτόμενος μάστιγι βιάζεται ἔνδοθεν αὐδήν
ἀγγέλειν πᾶσιν; αὐτὰρ πάλι πάντ' ἀργορεύσω,
ὄσσα θεὸς κέλεται μ' ἀγορευέμεν ἀνθρώποισιν.
(Sib. Or. 3.1-7)

Blessed, Heavenly one, who thunders on high, who has the cherubim
as your throne, I entreat you to give a little rest
to me who has prophesied unfailling truth, for my heart is tired within.
But why does my heart shake again? and why is my spirit
lashed by a whip, compelled from within to proclaim
an oracle to all? But I will utter everything again,
as much as God bids me say to men.

Yet again, the classic motif of the prophetess' body as a battleground is being used to highlight the disparity between humanity and divinity. In this case, though, in addition to showing that a prophetic body can become a pathway to divine experience for women, the prophetess' body displays wear and harm, hoping soon to be released from the cruelty that is binding it. The Sibyl's soul is not the virginal lens of the Pythia,¹³⁹ nor is her body the perfect vessel that can become impregnated with the deity's word. In many ways, this struggle is realized on the Sibyl's body in a much more intense way than previously. We do not see the Pythia fail, and Cassandra does not reject Apollo's prophecy until the end. Miriam, Deborah and Huldah all maintain their feminine

¹³⁹ See introduction.

prophetic identities without allowing the relationship between divinity and humanity to collapse. The Sibyl who speaks here, however, cannot prophesy without tiring, and cannot commune with the deity without in some manner complaining or failing. Such a depiction is either an evolution of the Sibyl's identity, or evidence of the plurality of forms that she takes within religious literature in her long life.

The third book of the *Oracula* concludes with a remarkable self-identification on the Sibyl's part, giving her parentage, her culture, and even information about her marriage. One aspect of this passage, however, is still clouded in mystery: nothing is entirely certain. The Sibyl attempts to separate herself from apocalypticism and rejoin the ranks of classical prophetesses. The world must listen to her prophecies and accept them as true, but they are still of the same type as before—filled with death, destruction, and judgment.

καὶ καλέσουσι βροτοὶ με καθ' Ἑλλάδα πατρίδος ἄλλης,
 ἐξ Ἐρυθρῆς γεγαυῖαν ἀναιδέα. οἱ δέ με Κίρκης
 μητρὸς καὶ Γνωστοῖο πατρὸς φήσουσι Σίβυλλαν 815
 μαινομένην ψεύστειραν. ἐπὴν δὲ γένηται ἅπαντα,
 τήνικα μου μνήμην ποιήσετε κούκετι μ' οὔδεις
 μαινομένην φήσειε, θεοῦ μέγαλοιο προφῆτιν.
 οὐ γὰρ ἔμοι δήλωσεν, ἃ πρὶν γενετῆρσιν ἔμοισιν.
 ὅσσα δὲ πρῶτ' ἐγένοντο, τὰ μοι θεὸς κατέλεξε, 820
 τῶν μετέπειτα δὲ πάντα θεὸς νόω ἐγκατέθηκεν,
 ὥστε προφητεύειν με τὰ τ' ἔσσομενα πρό τ' ἔοντα
 καὶ λέξαι θνητοῖς. ὅτε γὰρ κατεκλύζετο κόσμος
 ὕδασι, καὶ τις ἀνὴρ μόνος εὐδοκίμητος ἐλείφθη
 ὑλοτόμῳ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ ἐπιπλώσας ὑδάτεσσιν 825
 σὺν θηρσὶν πτηνοῖσί θ', ἵν' ἐμπλησθῆ πάλι κόσμος.
 τοῦ μὲν ἐγὼ νύμφη καὶ ἀφ' αἵματος αὐτοῦ ἐτύχθην,
 τῷ τὰ πρῶτ' ἐγένοντο. τὰ δ' ἔσχατα πάντ' ἀπεδείχθη.
 ὥστ' ἀπ' ἐμοῦ στόματος τὰδ' ἀληθινὰ πάντα λελέχθω.
 (Sib. Or., 3.813-829)

Throughout Greece mortals will say that I am of another country,

a shameless one, born of Erythrae. Some will say that
 I am Sibylla born of Circe and Gnostos as father,
 a crazy liar. But when everything comes to pass,
 then you will remember me and no longer will anyone
 say that I am crazy, I who am a prophetess of the great God.
 For he did not reveal to me what he had revealed before to my parents
 but what happened first, these things my father told me
 and God put all of the future in my mind
 so that I prophesy both future and former things
 and tell them to mortals. For when the world was deluged
 with waters, and a certain single approved man was left
 floating on the waters in a house of hewn wood
 with beasts, and birds, so that the world might be filled again,
 I was his daughter-in-law and I was of his blood.
 The first things happened to him and all the latter things have been
 revealed,
 so let these things from my mouth be accounted true.

What jumps out first, of course, is the cross-cultural linkage between the Hebrew Bible and Classical mythology. The Sibyl is the daughter of Circe, a well-known mythological witch and demi-goddess,¹⁴⁰ and the daughter-in-law of Noah, the man known for fathering humanity after the great deluge.¹⁴¹ She is here a strange woman—a woman “of another country.” All of our previous prophetesses have been of known origin, and in fact closely linked to everyone for whom they prophesy. Miriam, Deborah and Huldah were all Israelites (or Hebrews), and the entirety of their audience involved other members of the same ethnic and social group. The Pythia could have been a woman from anywhere in Greece¹⁴² (even though she was likely Delphian in origin), but her suppliants were almost always Hellenes, or people who identified with Hellenic

¹⁴⁰ See Homer’s *Odyssey*, book 10. Circe was the daughter of Helios and Perse, an Oceanid. Circe was a demi-goddess and witch, exhibiting various magical powers.

¹⁴¹ See Genesis.

¹⁴² Parke and Wormell, 28.

culture in some way (like Croesus¹⁴³). Cassandra, of course, was Trojan. Her prophecy involved the fall of Troy and various members of her family—perhaps she was the prophetess with the smallest audience, but still, it was an audience drawn from her family and countryfolk. The Sibyl, though, is someone entirely different. The Sibyl who speaks here is from Erythrae (the Red Sea), and possibly even a daughter-in-law of Noah. Her oracles are for the Jews of Egypt,¹⁴⁴ and even though she is descended from a distant ancestor of theirs, the family connection is faint and potentially even non-existent. Her parents, she says, might be Circe and Gnostos (the “knowing one”), neither of whom exists in Jewish literature. Her linkage to the Greek pantheon, however, gives her prophecy validity to a wide range.

The Sibyl’s parents are also familiar with prophecy. They were once the recipients of an unknown revelation. If it ever actually existed, it was likely in literature that is no longer present. This revelation, however, while it seems to have been apocalyptic in nature, is described using the root word *δηλοῶ* (*deilo-o*), “to show or display” (Sib. Or. 3.819). This is instead of the more expected word for reveal, *ἀποκαλύπτω* (*apokalupto*), from which the word “apocalypse” takes its roots. The Sibyl is making a conscious decision to distance herself from apocalypticism through style and vocabulary, even though by doing so she distances herself even farther from classical prophetesses.

The *Oracula* are not responses to questions, nor are they cryptic messages containing courses of action. They are messages of enlightenment for the world at large,

¹⁴³ “Lydia,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 898.

¹⁴⁴ John Joseph Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism* (Missoula, Society of Biblical Literature, 1974), 13.

predicting catastrophic events and future wars. In several cases, the Sibyl tells the entire history of the world, starting with the creation myth related in Genesis and ending with a resounding crash at Judgment Day. Most importantly, perhaps, she preaches monotheism and morality, predicting death and destruction for Egyptians, Greeks and Romans while hoping for some sort of redemption for the “chosen people” that she represents.¹⁴⁵ The messianic tenor that characterizes all her prophecies is decidedly un-Hellenic as well; in that respect, they can be compared quite closely with the biblical books of Daniel and Revelations. This, in addition to the revealed nature of the books, is one of the most important markers of the apocalyptic nature of this work. The Sibyl evolves along with her prophecy, and though she exhibits more and more apocalyptic tendencies, traces of her classical past, and her battleground body, can still be seen.

Sib. Or. 1 begins:

Ἀρχομένη πρώτης γενεῆς μερόπων ἀνθρώπων
ἄρχις ἐπ’ ἔσχατίησι προφητεύσω τὰ ἕκαστα,
ὀππόσα πρὶν γέγονεν, πόσα δ’ ἐστίν, ὀπόσσα δὲ μέλλει
ἔσσεσθαι κόσμῳ διὰ δυσσεβίας ἀνθρώπων.

(Sib. Or. 1.1-4)

I shall prophesy, beginning from the first of mortal-speaking men, from their beginning to the ends, with respect to each the type of things that were, and those that are, and those coming to be in the world through the irreverence of mortals.

Immediately, two important signs of apocalypse are evident. Firstly, the Sibyl is not giving an answer to a question. Her scope is much wider: she speaks of everything, from beginning to end. Recapitulations of history are common features of apocalyptic literature. Secondly, the last phrase indicates that special attention will be paid to the

¹⁴⁵ Sib. Or., 3, 5, 6.

coming disaster, which is blamed on the sinfulness and irreverence of humanity. This implies, rather explicitly, that the speaker and hearers see themselves as living in the *εσχατον/eschaton*, or the end of days. Neither of these is a necessary feature of prophecy, but their presence indicates an apocalyptic work to follow. There are, as with many literary genres, certain features that are almost always present or absent in apocalypses.

Most importantly in this passage, perhaps, is the absence of enthusiasm and inspiration—the Sibyl simply says “I shall prophesy,” but does signify that a divinity is bodily inhabiting her. In Sib. Or. 1.2 (and subsequent books of the *Oracula*) we are informed that her prophecies come from “God,” presumably the Judaeo-Christian deity. Here, however, when the Sibyl begins her lengthy discourse on the history of men’s evil, the prophecy is “bidden,” or commanded to her. “Firstly, God commands me to tell you...” (Sib. Or. 1.5). The reader has no concept of whether or not God is dwelling within her, as with Cassandra or the Pythia. This can help to elevate the Sibyl as a divine figure in her own right (which she certainly becomes in some aspects of Roman cult).

The *Oracula Sibyllina* return to a similar theme, however, at the end of the narrative arc that encompasses books one and two. After a description of the end of the world (which includes the punishment of the wicked in addition to the rewards of the righteous), a familiar identity appears to close the apocalypse.

Αἶαῖ ἐγὼ δειλή, τί γενήσομαι ἡματι τῷδε,
ἀνθ’ ὧν ἡ δύσφρων γε πονησαμένη περὶ πάντων 340
ἤλιτον οὔτε γάμω μεμελημένη οὔτε λογισμοῖς.
ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν μέλαθροισιν ἐμοῖς πολυπάμμονος ἀνδρός
δευομένους ἀπέκλεισα. τὰ δ’ ἔκνομα πρόσθεν ἔρεξα
εἰδυῖα. σὺ δέ, σῶτερ, ἐμῶν ἀπὸ μαστικτῆρων

ῥῦσαι δὴ με κυνῶπιν, ἀναιδέα περ ῥέξασαν. 345
ἦδε δ' ἐγὼ λίτομαι σε βαιὸν παῦσαί μεν ἀοιδῆς,
ἄγιε μαννοδότα, βασιλεῦ μεγάλης βασιλείης.
(Sib. Or. 2.339-347)

And I am the forlorn one, ah! What will I become on that day,
against that which I have done poorly, wrong-minded, concerning
myself with everything, but caring not for marriage or reasons?
But even in my dwelling places, that one of a very wealthy man,
I have shut out the ones needing me. And I once knowingly did
those things outside the law. And you, savior, save me, a reckless one
from those things chasing me, even though I have done terribly.
And I beg you to give me pause from my song,
holy manna-bestower, great king of kings.

The Sibyl becomes a woman mourning her destiny at the end of days, hoping that, because of her special ability to tell the past, present, and future, she will be granted some sort of holy forgiveness. She is neither the woman in direct communion with godhead she once was, nor the slightly more removed, subtly distant demi-goddess we shall see in the Roman cult: in this instance, her very humanity and inferiority are emphasized. We see an identity divorced from its body, forced to assert itself through other means. The Sibyl is tired—but rather than expressing that exhaustion through language of her body, as she does in Sib. Or. 3.1-7, she focuses on the past, using general terms like “I have done terribly” and “give me pause.”

The *Oracula Sibyllina* are long and full of references to the Sibyl's identity, but it would, again, be the task of a lifetime to catalog and analyze them all. These selections from the first three books, however, have shown that in the Greek, Jewish, and Christian imaginations, sexuality and physicality began to take a less prominent role as prophecy slowly morphed into apocalypse.

The Sibyl had a long life, but that life was much prolonged by the Romans. Stories of the Cumaean Sibyl appear as far back as the Roman monarchy, with the actual cult site itself likely being even older.¹⁴⁶ She appears in the myth of Tarquinius Superbus as an old woman who walks up to the king and offers him nine books of prophecy for an exorbitant price. Eventually the king spends the same amount of money on only three books, which become the most important tools of Roman prophecy in the Republican and Imperial periods. The establishment of the *quindecimviri*, whose only job was to consult these books in times of crisis, helped to further engrave the importance of these Sibylline prophecies and the Sibyls themselves onto the Roman psyche.¹⁴⁷

Augustus also had an important connection with the Sibylline tradition. Not only was he supposedly visited by the Tiburtine Sibyl in a nocturnal vision,¹⁴⁸ but he reopened and reconsecrated the cave of the Sibyl at Cumae when he rededicated the temple of Apollo on the Cumaean Acropolis. He also attributed the Sibyl's prophetic authority to the power of Apollo; the Sibylline Books in Rome were moved from the Capitol to the temple of Apollo Palatinus, near his house, and when Vergil wrote of the Sibyl, he described her as being inspired by Apollo's power.¹⁴⁹ Augustus' actions were one of the most important factors in the Sibyl's existence as a Roman symbol.

Two important authors captured the Sibyl's persona during the reign of Augustus: Vergil and Ovid. In Vergil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas spends the bulk of book six with the Sibyl,

¹⁴⁶ M. C. McBing and H. W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (New York, Routledge, 1988), 45.

¹⁴⁷ *Antiquities*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ixii.1-6.

¹⁴⁸ *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* vi.

¹⁴⁹ Vergil, *Aeneid*, 6.337.

taking advantage of her role as an intermediary between the spiritual and mortal realms.

His first interaction with her, however, is decidedly priestly:

ni iam praemissus Achates
adforet, atque una Phoebi Triviaeque sacerdos, 35
Deiphobe Glauci, fatur quae talia regi:
“Non hoc ista sibi tempus spectacula poscit;
nunc grege de intacto septem mactare iuencos
praestiterit, totidem lectas de more bidentes.”
Talibus adfata Aenean (nec sacra morantur 40
iussa viri), Teucros vocat alta in templa sacerdos.
(Aeneid, 6.34-41)

Translated, this introduction reads:

And now Achates, once sent forth,
draws near, along with a priestess of Phoebus and the Crossroad goddess,
Deiphobe daughter of Glaucus, who says such things to the king:
“This moment does not beg you for a stadium seat;
now go, to sacrifice seven young bulls from an entire
herd, and seven ewes entirely, as is our custom.”
Having spoken with such words to Aeneas (the men do not delay
with her sacred command), the priestess called the Teucrians into the high
temple.

In our first glimpse of the Sibyl in her shrine at Cumae, she is termed a “sacerdos Phoebi Triviaeque”—a priestess of Phoebus and Diana (Trivia). She not a prophetess sitting upon her throne, or even a wandering, ecstatic priestess spouting out prophecies. She is a priestess giving orders for sacrifice, and even more importantly—she is a priestess of Apollo and Diana, one the god who is normally responsible for divine inspiration and the other a goddess famous for her virginity. Her father, Glaucus is also mentioned. Classicists agree that he is a sea-god, also mentioned by Ovid.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.

Immediately, then the Sibyl is presented as a woman for whom prophecy is *not* the main identifying quality. As a *sacerdos*, she oversees the official ceremonies that take place in the temple of Apollo. As the daughter of Glaucus, she is a demi-goddess with rights to a shrine—Cumae. This shrine, however, has been significantly demoted from the site of intense worship that archaeologists believe to have taken place there.¹⁵¹ Soon after, there is a slight shift in the Sibyl’s persona and presentation. She changes from a priestess to a prophetess, and Aeneas makes sure to note all the changes.

Ventum erat ad limen, cum virgo. “Poscere fata 45
tempus” ait; “deus, ecce, deus!” Cui talia fanti
ante fores subito non voltus, non color unus,
non comptae mansere comae; sed pectus anhelum,
et rabie fera corda tument; maiorque videri,
nec mortale sonans, adflata est numine quando 50
iam propiore dei. “Cessas in vota precesque,
Tros” ait “Aenea? Cessas? Neque enim ante dehiscent
attonitae magna ora domus.” Et talia fata
conticuit.

(Aeneid, 6.45-54)

This scene is practically reminiscent of a horror movie. It reads:

When they came near to the threshold, the virgin said,
“It is the time to seek your fate! The god, behold, the god!” And
immediately
there was no face on the one speaking such words before the gate, not
even one color:
her hair did not remain plaited, but her breast was gasping
and her wild breast swelled with frenzy; and she appeared larger,
not sounding like a mortal, and she was touched by a power
even closer than the god. “Are you stopping with your vows and prayers,
Trojan Aeneas?” she said. “Are you stopping? For before nothing else
do the great thundering lips of this house close.” And having spoken thus
she was silent.

¹⁵¹ Parke, 134.

Aeneas is actually able to see the inspiration and ἐνθουσιάζω/
enthousiasmos of the Cumaean Sibyl. The suppliants at Delphi would not have been so privileged—they had to wait and hear the results of their inquiries from the *hosioi* who attended the Pythia.¹⁵² Most notable in her depiction is the change that comes over her physical appearance, marked by the significant word “virgin.” The Sibyl’s hair comes out of its braids, and attention is drawn to the front of her body. She is clearly female here, and more than that—a young, unmarried, pure, “virginal” female. The unbound hair is a symbol of maidenhood in Roman culture, especially during Augustus’ time. Care is being taken to liken the Sibyl to her ancestress the Pythia, but Vergil works on another level as well.

The language Vergil uses, as well as the words uttered by the Sibyl herself show an identity in which boundaries are conflated, as with other prophetesses, and a body which is still a battleground for that identity. The Sibyl shouts out “The god, behold, the god!” (Aeneid 6.45), marking the point at which Apollo begins his physical entrance into her body. We see her go into a frenzy; this is the μανία/*mania*¹⁵³ of the prophetic tradition. Her hair becomes unbound, her breast, like the breast of the Sibyl from Sib. Or. 2.2, begins heaving.

Not only does the Sibyl lose control over her body, but identities shift and conflate within her as well. She is a prophetess struggling to speak for her god, as well as a virgin (*virgo*) afraid of the physical inhabitation that occurs in her body. Just as the identities of virgin and crone, priestess and bride mixed and blended on the throne of the

¹⁵² See earlier, chapter 4. The *hosioi* were the Pythia’s attendants.

¹⁵³ See introduction.

Pythia,¹⁵⁴ the identities of the Sibyl are fighting each other and the god who is trying to subsume them.

Our next glimpse of the Sibyl gives a little more depth to her portrait. Aeneas is speaking to her, giving her instructions about how he wants his prophecy delivered.

Foliis tantum ne carmina manda, 75
ne turbata volent rapidis ludibria ventis;
ipsa canas oro.” Finem dedit ore loquendi.
At, Phoebi nondum patiens, immanis in antro
bacchatur vates, magnum si pectore possit
excussisse deum; tanto magis ille fatigat 80
os rabidum, fera corda domans, fingitque premendo.
Ostia iamque domus patuere ingentia centum
sponte sua, vatisque ferunt responsa per auras:
(Vergil, Aeneid, 75-83)

Vergil presents the situation thus:

Do not confine such a song to leaves,
lest, disordered, they fly—playthings for quick winds;
I pray that you sing yourself!” He gave an end of speaking with his
mouth.
And not yet suffering Phoebus’ touch, the great prophetess
brazenly danced in the cave, as if able to cut out the great god
from her breast; with even more he vexed
her frenzied lips, dominating her wild heart, and pressuring, handled her.
The abode’s hundred huge doors now opened
on their own, and carried the prophetess’ response through the ears.

Subsumption of the Sibyl’s identity occurred outside of her body as well, and Vergil shows this to us. The Cumaean Sibyl’s normal *modus operandi*, as opposed to simply speaking through inspiration, was to write her pronouncements on leaves. If the wind caused the leaves to move out of order, that only lent mystery and subtlety to the

¹⁵⁴ See Pythia chapter.

message. In Rome, just as in ancient Palestine, writing was a masculine activity.¹⁵⁵ Though the Torah was not the sacred canon of the Romans, Sperling's ideas about writing, canonization, and masculinity as outlined in chapter 1 are still valid.¹⁵⁶ There were certainly women in the ancient Mediterranean who could write, as evidenced by poetry and other literature. Scribes, for the most part, were men, and the stylus and tablet were symbols heavily associated with masculine activity. The Sibyl, as she writes her prophecies on leaves, steps into an authoritative masculine role as she consigns her utterances to a male-dominated sphere. Aeneas makes a reference to the Sibyl's leaves (Aeneid 6.75), but asks her to simply speak to him instead. In order to do so, she undergoes a violent possession. Her body, in the classic mode, becomes a battleground just as all the other prophetesses'. Her perception of the future is the perception that Apollo forces upon her, just as Augustus built Apollo's temple directly on top of the Cumaean Acropolis.¹⁵⁷

Aeneid makes a return to imagery of the Sibyl as "wild," playing off the scene of ἐνθουσιάζω/*enthousiasmos* that occurs in Aeneid 6.45-54. The imagery of the Sibyl as a woman Apollo must tame is carried throughout the rest of Aeneid 6. In several more instances, her "wild" and "feral" nature is documented, and the only way Aeneas can wrest information from her is if the god entirely subdues her. The Sibyl's identity is one that is entirely subsumed by its interaction with the god, and this subsumption is enacted upon her body.

¹⁵⁵ William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹⁵⁶ See chapters on Miriam and Huldah.

¹⁵⁷ Parke, 123.

ea frena furenti
concutit, et stimulos sub pectore vertit Apollo.
Ut primum cessit furor et rabida ora quierunt,
incipit Aeneas heros....

100

(*Aeneid* 6.100-103)

While raging,
she struck together a bridle, and Apollo turned darts under her breast.
When her fury stopped first and her frenzied lips were quiet,
the hero Aeneas began....

The Sibyl's identity is more than destroyed. She is presented as Cassandra, who also experienced prophecy as madness and violence. Her identity is denigrated into that of a wild horse, or some other creature that can only be tamed by the hand of a man. Just as a warrior uses a horse on the battlefield, or a farmer uses an ox to farm his land, so Apollo uses the Sibyl to give his messages on earth. In fact, this metaphor holds as she leads Aeneas into the underworld. She is a guide to lead him, or a horse to draw his chariot, or even a priestess to calm the dead— but never a woman to walk beside him, regardless of the imagery that places her marriageable qualities at the front.

The last few pages of this section will be dedicated to Ovid's story of the Sibyl. Ovid in no uncertain terms compares the Sibyl to Cassandra, and also presents her body as the violent battleground it is. In book fourteen of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid retells the story of Aeneas and the Sibyl. After returning from the underworld, Aeneas thanks the Sibyl and promises to build her a temple. Her response:

“nec dea sum” dixit “nec sacri turis honore
humanum dignare caput; neu nescius erres,
lux aeterna mihi carituraque fine dabatur,
si mea virginitas Phoebos patuisset amanti.
Dum tamen hanc sperat dum praecorumpere donis
me cupit, ‘elige’ ait, ‘virgo Cumaea, quid optes:
optatis potiere tuis.’ Ego pulveris hausti

130

135

ostendi cumulum: quot haberet corpora pulvis,
 tot mihi natales contingere vana rogavi;
 excidit, ut peterem iuvenes quoque protinus annos.
 Hos tamen ille mihi dabat aeternamque iuventam, 140
 si venerem paterer: contempto munere Phoebi
 innuba permaneo; sed iam felicior aetas
 terga dedit, tremuloque gradu venit aegra senectus,
 quae patienda diu est (nam iam mihi saecula septem
 acta vides): superest, numeros ut pulveris aequem, 145
 ter centum messes, ter centum musta videre.
 Tempus erit, cum de tanto me corpore parvam
 longa dies faciet consumptaque membra senecta
 ad minimum redigentur onus: nec amata videbor
 nec placuisse deo; Phoebus quoque forsitan ipse 150
 vel non cognoscet vel dilexisse negabit:
 usque adeo mutata ferar, nullique videnda,
 voce tamen noscar; vocem mihi fata relinquent.”
 (*Metamorphoses*, 14.130-153)

Translated, this reads:

“I am not a goddess,” she said, “nor is it good to dignify the head
 of humans with the honor of sacred incense; and so you may err no more
 unknowing,
 eternal light and almost-freedom from the end were given to me,
 if my virginity would have opened for my lover Phoebus.
 Nevertheless, while he hoped for this and desired to corrupt me
 beforehand with gifts, ‘choose,’ he said, ‘what you might desire, Cumaean
 maiden:
 You shall gain your wishes.’ I pointed at a pile of
 drawn dust: “As many bodies as the dust has,
 let that many birthdays consume me,” I asked for, vain;
 It escaped me, that I should ask for youth as well as straightforward years.
 Nevertheless, he gave me those-and eternal youth,
 if I would open my love: the gift of Apollo refused,
 I still remain unveiled. The happier age has now given
 its back, and old age comes with a trembling gait,
 which must be borne for a long time (for you see seven centuries
 done for me): There remains, equaling the numbers of the dust,
 three hundred harvests, three hundred wine-pressings to see.
 There will be a time when the long day makes me small
 from my body, and my limbs consumed with old age,
 will be reduced to the smallest weight: I will not seem
 loved, or to have pleased a god; even Phoebus himself perhaps
 will either not recognize me, or will deny that he delighted in me:

But, even though I will be borne so far, changed, and discerned of none,
nevertheless I will be known with a voice; the fates will leave a voice to
me.

Ovid, like Vergil, makes it quite clear that it is a masculine deity who is responsible for any sort of miraculous act, and not a human woman. “I am no goddess,” she says, affirming her own humanity and minimizing any sort of personal access she may have to divinity. In the story that follows, Apollo and the Sibyl are presented as almost human lovers, exchanging tokens and kind words. The Sibyl is a figure so beautiful that even Apollo is beguiled—but in the tradition of Cassandra, she changes her mind after the bestowal of the gift. Conversely, perhaps, her mind is always made, and she simply asserts her femininity by claiming what the god is offering. The result in this case, however, is quite different from Cassandra’s demise. Instead of the incredibly conflated experience of madness and destruction that centers around Apollo physically inhabiting her body, the Sibyl becomes a tiny creature, hardly even a woman at all. She quickly passes out of the age that would make her an appropriate wife, and for the rest of her existence must grow older and older, living as an aged matron in the margins of the world.

The Sibyl’s physical appearance takes precedence here, turning her from a beautiful young woman once loved by the god into a decrepit crone. She was once a beautiful virgin, beloved of a god--and even now, though she has dwindled, she still inhabits the same body. This body, yet again, is the space where her identity fights with the god’s, and ultimately loses. Regardless of what is done to the Sibyl’s body, her voice

remains. Similar to Ovid's version of Echo's story,¹⁵⁸ the voice remains as her identification. What is different, however, is that while Echo's body disappears entirely, relegating her to a sonic phenomenon, the Sibyl's body still exists. The prophetess' body is essential, and if it should disappear—so would the prophecy.

The woman's voice, since it emanates from her body, is of course another necessary component of the prophetic experience. So many times we see that it is a voice or a cry that identifies a woman and allows her to live and endure. Echo wastes away to nothing but a voice,¹⁵⁹ and Cassandra, as shown earlier, is often first experienced through the shrill cries of terror and pain that surround her speech. Miriam raises her voice in song, and it is Deborah, not Barak, who praises YHVH for victory on the battlefield.¹⁶⁰ While writing is the man's domain in the world of creativity, it is the voice, and the speech that pours forth as an act of inspiration and an outpouring of identity that is entirely a woman's.

Perhaps Ovid is acknowledging this by allowing his Sibyl to live on as a deathless whisper. Either way, consciously or subconsciously, he is paying homage to the world that the Sibyl has participated in. The Sibyl's voice, for Ovid, becomes the deathless body that seduces divinity, still speaking with authority, but left to waste away and be forgotten. These three literary works are only the briefest of literary samplings involving the Sibyl. Many more Sibyls wandered the ancient world,¹⁶¹ and many of them are recorded in some chapter of history's annals. Even in the short span of three texts and the

¹⁵⁸ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 3.

¹⁵⁹ See Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 3.

¹⁶⁰ See earlier chapters.

¹⁶¹ Lactantius, *Res Divinae*.

few hundred years they span, a long, varied, tradition of Sibylline identities is apparent. In some cases she is the eastern daughter of a goddess or witch; in others, the child of a biblical patriarch. For Vergil, she is the untamable priestess of a domineering god, while Ovid does his best to ensure that we understand the forces that tear her identity into shreds.

Regardless of who is writing her or how she is portrayed, the themes that we have explored with other prophetesses hold just as true for the Sibyl. Her identity is always endangered by the physical presence of a god within her body. She takes roles traditionally ascribed to men for herself, operating in a masculine sphere with her woman's authority. And perhaps most importantly, she struggles with her entire body and being to not be subsumed by the one for whom she prophesies—the divinity within her.

Conclusion Let Me Sing

A few weeks ago, I was given a copy of the essay I had written with my application to Macalester College. I had vague recollections of writing it, remembering that it had something to do with reading from the Torah at my synagogue (a common enough activity during high school) and that I had been relatively proud of the way in which it was written. Both these memories proved correct, but only barely so—the essay was lovely, and engaged a topic that has resounded with relevance throughout my time in school.

I did indeed write about chanting from the Torah, and the way in which the words of the text I sang interwove themselves with the community that formed around me. Since it was the seventh day of Passover, the portion read was a part of the biblical Exodus story—and my particular reading was Exodus 14 and 15, the actual crossing of the Sea of Reeds. I wrote about the ease with which I traveled through the actual narrative, and the nervousness that marked my leap from the traditional chanting of Exodus 14 to the loftier and more unique melodies of Exodus 15, the actual song sung by Moses and his people. I continued on to the end of chapter fifteen—and though I clearly remember chanting through to the end, my essay stops when Moses' song ends.

Like so much other writing that explores and engages literature from all venues, my writing ended when the man's voice stopped speaking. Had I only continued writing (or even thinking!), I would have come to the next verse, one that has proven itself to be rich in meaning and ripe for interpretation:

ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרון את התוף בידה
ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה בתפים ובמחלות:

And Miriam the prophetess, sister of Aaron, took her drum
in her hand. All the women went out after her with drums
and dancing.

As the woman opened her mouth and allowed her voice to ring out, my mind closed and sealed itself, not even considering the richness that such an enigmatic and powerful text could add to my essay. I found myself incredibly disappointed with my eighteen-year-old self (and more than a little jealous—I wrote so easily and gracefully back then!).

Fortunately, I am able to forgive my past self, because I was deeply entrenched in this project when I was given the opportunity to read my old application. Though I might have participated in their long silence four years ago, I strive today to not only hear their voices, but listen to them, and repeat them. In four years at school, I have learned to pay attention to what the Pythia called “the One Unspeaking.” Even if she does not speak, her voice is just as loud—and often, she does not speak because she is too busy singing, dancing, and fighting a battle upon her own skin.

Prophetesses in the ancient Mediterranean, I have discovered, are each connected to the others with as many shining similarities as she has unique qualities that separate her from her sisters. All of them are women, and prophesy when they are physically inhabited by a divinity. All of them are associated with one location more than any other spot, and yet their prophecy involves movement, dance, and physicality that transport the reader far beyond the desert at Kadesh or the temple at Delphi. All of them pour their

identities into their song and prophecy, for fear that they will otherwise be entirely subsumed by a divine identity—and all of them fight a battle with all their beings, struggling to maintain their own feminine identities.

Miriam maintains her identity through song and dance, striving to assert the necessity and power of her place in the community even as her body is denigrated. Her body is recognized by her people, Moses, and YHVH as the seat of her authority. We understand this through her bodily participation as a leader in a community-wide celebration, as well as when she is punished with “snowy scales” for speaking out against Moses. In the performance of her victory song to YHVH, we are able to see that her prophecy involves her as well as those surrounding her. In her confrontation with Moses, we begin to conceptualize her importance as a leader, a prophetess, and a representative of the religion not contained in the words of the Torah. Miriam leads as she dances, crossing barriers between masculine and feminine, human and divine.

Deborah builds visual bridges between the Hebrew prophetesses and the Greek, sitting in judgment under her palm tree in the same manner that the Pythia sits on her tripod or the Sibyl in her cave. She too refuses to rest within the categories our understanding of gender has created: she leads an army to war, liberates her people and again, like Miriam, she prophesies in praise to YHVH as she celebrates her victory. In Deborah’s song we also gain more of an understanding of why the prophetess’ body is so important: as with Miriam before her and Huldah, the Pythia, Cassandra, and the Sibyl afterwards, her body is the battleground in the struggle for her identity. With the use of emphatic personal pronouns coupled with hortatory verbs, Deborah fights to maintain her own presence as the deity moves within her.

Huldah does not focus on her body to the same extent as the other prophetesses. More than the rest, however, she participates in patriarchal masculine structures, acting as a court prophetess for King Josiah. Her authentication of the Book of Teaching indicates a need for both feminine and masculine authority in prophetic, religious and legal issues. Her interaction with the written word—the Torah, a decidedly masculine symbol—can be understood as the reason underlying her divorce from the body and physicality. As she moves closer and closer to the scribal tradition, she distances herself from the realm of prophecy—a move that also serves to separate her from the intense physicality inherent in the prophetic experience.

The Pythia sat on the prophetic throne for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. She appeared in literature for at least as long as a prophetess dwelt in the temple at Delphi. We learn much from the Pythia that connects her with the other prophetesses—her prophecy is connected to rituals of performance and song, she dwells in a single location on the earth, and, of course, her body is absolutely central to her ability to prophesy. Notions of the feminine body underlie medical as well as prophetic ideas, indicating the necessity of bodies (and specifically female bodies) for both. In addition to her body, the Pythia needs her throne, which allows her to sit so that the god may impregnate her. It is upon this throne that we see Apollo's identity fighting with the Pythia's, both attempting to exist in the body of a human.

Cassandra follows, another mortal woman inhabited by Apollo. She is the first of the prophetesses we have seen who terms her relationship with divinity in the language of sexuality—but as the Sibyl follows her, she is not the last. Cassandra enlightens her audience to the pain and suffering that comes from the bodily inhabitation of divinity. In

her speech, actions, and ultimately, her death, it is clear that the struggle taking place within her is slowly killing her. She does not “go crazy” as often assumed—she slowly dies as her identity is subsumed by Apollo’s, as she is destroyed by that which leads her.

Lastly, the Sibyl exists in many different traditions. In many, her prophecy connects her to her predecessors: she dwells in a shrine and receives inspiration from a deity. In others, she is somewhat distanced from the common bodily experience of other prophetesses. Regardless of how she is represented in varying traditions, the Sibyl is still clearly tied to the tradition of her sisters. She too experiences prophecy in terms redolent with sexuality—like Cassandra, she promises her virginity for a divine gift, and like Cassandra, has the gift turned upon her when she attempts to maintain her singular identity instead of allowing the god to subsume her.

Perhaps it is incorrect to label the prophetess as “the One Unspeaking.” She speaks often, sings often, and acts often, telling a story about her own femininity and humanity that echoes and resonates through texts, stories, and religious traditions. Physicality defines her, but it is the prophetess’ body that makes her who she is. It allows her to sing, dance, and move as divinity inspires her. It also creates a space for her identity to dwell, a space where she can fight to maintain that identity in the presence of often-hostile masculine deities.

I have briefly played with the idea that men, in some fashion, become women when they prophesy through direct inspiration. Taken in context with everything else I have discovered, it is clear that prophecy is inextricably tied to the feminine body. Men’s bodies become feminine when the deity speaks through them—and women’s bodies are highlighted as spaces of desire and contention. They become battlegrounds.

The prophetess' body is not the only body upon which a battle rages. Identities are in constant flux, growing, developing, and changing. The invasion of a deity does not have to be quite as “divine” as it is for a prophetess—any number of exterior forces and pressures can battle against our identities and turn our own bodies into battlegrounds. Perhaps this requires a rethinking of what it means to have a “feminine” body. Perhaps we should take a lesson from the prophetesses, and remember that while our bodies are central, it is our identities that inhabit them.

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