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Re-Reading Delphic Oracles: The Significance of Textual Representations of Oracle Consultations

Which of the Delphic oracles transmitted to us by ancient writers were genuinely the utterances of the Pythia and the priests? This paper aims to show why this question cannot be answered and why (more fundamentally) it misunderstands the nature of oracular discourse and its transmission.

Research on Delphic oracles has mainly been preoccupied with issues of authenticity. The three most fundamental works in this field (Parke/Wormell 1956, Crahay 1956, Fontenrose 1977) were all looking for criteria of authenticity in order to distinguish between not genuine and genuine oracles. Their main interest focuses on reconstructing the İreal history behind the oracles rejecting their non-genuine parts. Most of their considerations remain purely speculative for two reasons: First, the very heterogeneous nature of the source material does not in most cases allow a reconstruction of their true historical background. Second, it is not of primary importance to distinguish between genuine oracles and oracles which have not been spoken at Delphi or to investigate the background of possible forgeries. The significance of the oracles lies in the fact that most people in antiquity believed in them, that they formed narratives around them, and that classical authors included stories representing oracle consultations in their works.

Using one representation of an oracle consultation as an example I will work out the main characteristics of such stories and demonstrate why and in what sense the former approach failed to grasp them. I will develop my argumentation in three steps: First, I will begin my analysis with re-defining the authenticity of these stories. Following Maurizio (L. Maurizio, CQ 1997), I shall argue that the authenticity of a genre based on belief can not lie in the dichotomy between facts and fiction. Second, I shall dwell on the openness of Delphic oracle stories as their probably most characteristic feature. Here, my point will be that Delphic oracle stories are not at all self-contained, definite narratives. I shall go on to suggest that oracle stories typically contain (a more or less diffuse) potential for interpretation which the individual recipient will understand in his own way, and which he will interpret according to his own (culturally determined) disposition. This high symbolic potential mentioned above is to a large extent due to another primary feature of this genre, which I will tackle in the third section of my paper: the specific ambiguity of its language and the resulting polysemy.