



## THE VOICE BEHIND THE MASK: PROBLEMATIZING THE THEATRE METAPHOR FOR ECSTATIC PROPHECY IN PLUTARCH'S *DE PYTHIAE ORACVLIS*

### ABSTRACT

*Different translations of Plutarch's De Pythiae oraculis 404B reflect an interpretative difficulty not yet adequately thematized by exegetes. Plutarch's dialogues on the Delphic oracle describe two perspectives on mantic inspiration: possession prophecy, where the god takes over the prophetess as a passive apparatus, and stimulation prophecy, where the god incites the prophecy, but the prophetess delivers the oracle through her own faculties. Plutarch understands the Pythia at Delphi to exhibit stimulation prophecy, not possession. One of his metaphors for inspiration comes from the theatre: the god 'puts the oracle into the Pythia's mouth, like an actor speaking through the mask' (De Pyth. or. 404B [Russell]). Some translators take the metaphor as describing possession prophecy (Goodwin), while others take it as stimulation prophecy (Babbitt)—in other words, it may describe the view Plutarch affirms or the view he rejects. This article assesses the two alternatives, concluding that the theatre metaphor describes possession prophecy.*

**Keywords:** altered states of consciousness; Apollo; Delphi; Greek religion; Middle Platonism; prophetic shrine; Pythian oracle

Plutarch discusses the functioning of the Pythian oracle at Delphi most extensively in two dialogues.<sup>1</sup> In *De Pythiae oraculis*, the interlocutors explore the supposed change from poetic oracles in the past to prosaic ones in their own time. In *De defectu oraculorum*, another group tries to account for the apparent decline in the number of oracles. Both dialogues present two different types of prophetic inspiration and ecstasy. In the first type, agency is ascribed almost exclusively to the god, who uses the prophetess as a passive apparatus (possession prophecy): 'the god himself ... enters into the bodies of his prophets and prompts their utterances' (414E–F). In the second, agency is shared between the god and the prophetess, with the god inciting the prophecy but the prophetess delivering the oracle by means of her own faculties (stimulation prophecy): 'the voice is not that of a god, nor the utterance of it, nor the diction, nor the metre, but all these are the woman's' (397C).<sup>2</sup> The two types are distinguished by whether the god takes over or merely prods the prophetess and by who holds primary

<sup>1</sup> For historical introductions to the Pythian oracle, see J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses* (Berkeley, 1978), 196–232; H. Bowden, *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy* (Cambridge, 2005); M.A. Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 2008), 211–39; S.A. Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (Malden, MA, 2008), 38–60; M. Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford, 2017), 130–7, 195–200, 224–31. For ancient narratives about the oracle, see J. Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi: Religion and Storytelling in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 'possession trance' and 'vision trance' in D.E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, 1983), 19–21, 32–4. But 'vision trance' is too specific. Unless otherwise noted, translations of ancient authors are from the Loeb Classical Library.

responsibility for the words of the oracle. Both dialogues indicate that Plutarch understands the Pythian oracle to exhibit stimulation prophecy, rather than possession.

Plutarch uses a variety of metaphors for both types of prophecy. One of these derives from the theatre (404B):<sup>3</sup>

We [must] hold pure and unerring opinions about the god, and [must] not believe that it is he himself who used [πρότερον] to compose the verses [τὸν τὰ ἔπη συντιθέντα] and who now [νῦν] puts the oracle into the Pythia's mouth [ὑποβάλλοντα τῇ Πυθίᾳ τοῦς χρησμούς], like an actor speaking through the mask [ὥσπερ ἐκ προσωπείων φθεγγόμενον].

It is not entirely clear, though, whether the metaphor describes stimulation or possession prophecy. Alternative translations of this passage illustrate the interpretative options more starkly.

For example, consider Babbitt's translation:

We [must] hold correct and uncontaminated opinions about the god, and [must] not believe that it was he himself who used to compose the verses in earlier times, while now he suggests the oracles to the prophetic priestess as if he were prompting an actor in a play to speak his words.

This translation portrays a change from possession prophecy (the god composing the words) to stimulation prophecy (the god merely suggesting the verses). It thus takes ὥσπερ ἐκ προσωπείων φθεγγόμενον as a metaphor for stimulation prophecy and translates προσωπεῖον as *play actor*. Although a playwright can give directions, the actor herself does the speaking.

But compare Goodwin's:

We [must] have but a true and religious opinion of the Deity; not irreverently conceiting that formerly he composed a stock of verses to be now repeated by the prophetess, as if he spoke through masks and visors.<sup>4</sup>

This translation portrays two stages of possession prophecy, with no mention of stimulation prophecy. It thus takes ὥσπερ ἐκ προσωπείων φθεγγόμενον as a metaphor for possession and translates προσωπεῖον as *mask* or *visor*. In possession prophecy, although the words might seem to come from the prophetess, the true speaker lies behind the mask.

This article evaluates these alternatives. First, it summarizes Plutarch's presentation of the two kinds of inspiration in *De Pythiae oraculis* and *De defectu oraculorum* to clarify the available categories. Then, it assesses arguments in favour of each interpretation to discern what type of prophecy the theatre metaphor more likely describes, concluding that it is possession, not stimulation, prophecy.

#### PROPHETIC INSPIRATION IN PLUTARCH

In *De Pythiae oraculis*, Theon, who seems to approximate Plutarch himself,<sup>5</sup> is the main voice presenting the mechanics of prophecy. Early on, Theon distinguishes two

<sup>3</sup> D. Russell (transl.), *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues* (Oxford, 1993), 73.

<sup>4</sup> W.W. Goodwin (transl.), *Plutarch's Morals* (Boston, 1878), 3.90–1; cf. E. Valgiglio (ed.), *Gli oracoli della Pizia* (Naples, 1992), 109.

<sup>5</sup> R. Lamberton, *Plutarch* (New Haven, CT, 2001), 156, 160–1; E.G. Simonetti, *A Perfect Medium? Oracular Divination in the Thought of Plutarch* (Leuven, 2017), 38.

agencies: the god and the prophetess (397B–D). The god’s role in the prophetic process is not to compose or deliver the oracles (ἀντὰ πεποιτημένα τὸν θεόν) but to supply the origin of the movement (ἀρχὴν τῆς κινήσεως): ‘he puts into her mind only the visions, and creates a light in her soul in regard to the future’. This activity is identified as inspiration (ἐνθουσιασμός). The prophetess responds to this incitement by delivering the oracle with her own faculties: ‘the voice is not that of a god, nor the utterance of it, nor the diction, nor the metre, but all these are the woman’s’. And each prophetess is disposed by nature to be moved (πέφυκε κινεῖσθαι) in different ways (cf. 405E–406B). Plutarch here favours stimulation over possession prophecy, and the two types are distinguished by whether the words are those of the god or the prophetess.

Returning later to the natural disposition of each prophetess (404B–405D), Theon introduces the concept of the prophetess as the god’s instrument (ὄργανον). An instrument is designed to produce the result intended by the agent using it. But the result mimics the agent’s intention not in pure form but in mixed form, inflected by the nature (φύσις) of the instrument, like one person looks different in every mirror. Likewise, although the god discloses his thoughts in prophecy, the prophetess who is moved contributes movements of her own. Inspiration (ἐνθουσιασμός), therefore, is a mixture of two movements. After appealing to Homer (*Od.* 2.372) in support of one mover moving each instrument differently, Theon relates this dynamic to the original question of the dialogue: we should not be surprised when a prophetess untrained in poetry does not deliver oracles in verse.

*De Pythiae oraculis*, then, lays out the basic mechanics of stimulation prophecy: the god influences the soul of the prophetess, and the prophetess delivers the oracle by means of, and inflected by, her own faculties. This process is laid out in more detail in the next dialogue.

In *De defectu oraculorum*, it is the narrator, Plutarch’s brother Lamprias, who provides most of the details about the mechanics of prophecy and who seems to approximate the perspective of Plutarch himself.<sup>6</sup> Early on, Lamprias outlines a popular conception of the prophetic process, which he rejects (414E–F):

It is foolish and childish in the extreme to imagine that the god himself after the manner of ventriloquists [ὡσπερ τοὺς ἐγγαστριμύθους] ... enters into the bodies of his prophets and prompts their utterances [ὑποφθέγγεσθαι], employing their mouths and voices as instruments [ὄργανοις]. For if he allows himself to become entangled in men’s needs, he is prodigal with his majesty and he does not observe the dignity and greatness of his pre-eminence.

Two elements are refuted. First, it is not the god who acts directly in prophecy, which would be inconsistent with his sovereignty. The divine side will soon be explained instead by demigods (415A–B, 417A–B). Second, inspiration does not consist in manipulating the prophet like a puppet (possession prophecy).<sup>7</sup> Lamprias’ use of instrumentality language for possession may seem at odds with Theon’s discussion in the previous dialogue. But for Theon the instrument of the god is the *soul* of the prophetess, and the prophetess’ soul, not the god, employs her bodily faculties (404B–C). Lamprias himself later compares a rightly disposed prophetess to a well-tuned instrument (ὄργανον, 437D–E).

<sup>6</sup> Simonetti (n. 5), 84, 97; cf. F.E. Brenk, *In Mist Apparellled: Religious Themes in Plutarch’s Moralia and Lives* (Leiden, 1977), 85, 89, 114–19.

<sup>7</sup> ἔγγαστριμύθος is not a performance metaphor but a reference to particular prophets: Aune (n. 2), 40–1.

At the end of the dialogue (431D–438D), Lamprias explains the prophetic process that he affirms, with several levels of complementary causation between the prophetess, the earth and the divine (435E–437A). First, every human soul possesses the prophetic faculty, similar to memory but oriented toward the future, not the past. For this faculty to function, the rational dimension of the soul, pertaining to the present, must be relaxed in order to enter the irrational realm of the future, where the prophetess, like a blank tablet, may receive impressions. This transformation is identified with inspiration (ἐνθουσιασμός, 431D–432F). Second, Lamprias provides a natural cause of this transformation. The earth emits many streams—whether exhalation (ἀναθυμίασις), vapour (ἀτμός), current (ῥεῦμα), or spirit (πνεῦμα)—which can affect the soul for good or ill. One of these is the prophetic spirit (τὸ ... μαντικὸν ῥεῦμα καὶ πνεῦμα), which creates the prophetic temperament in the soul, as light enables sight. Like all vapours, the prophetic spirit occasionally disappears or reappears owing to weather and other factors, which may explain the decline in oracles (432C–434C).<sup>8</sup> Third, the ultimate origin of inspiration is in the divine. The demigods, who oversee nature on behalf of the gods, take up prophetic spirits like picks (πλήκτρον) for plucking the lyre of the soul. Sacrifices, therefore, are made beforehand, to ensure that the god is present and to seek from the god some indication of favourable conditions (436D–438D). Only this constellation of agencies explains the prophetic phenomena. If the gods were not the ultimate cause, why the divining sacrifice (437A–C)? If the vapours were not intermediaries, why the location-specific shrines (433C–E)? If the prophetess' soul were not active, why designate particular women and keep them chaste (437C–438D)?

*De defectu oraculorum* thus provides an expanded outline of stimulation prophecy. In *De Pythiae oraculis*, the god acts on the soul, which acts through the body to speak the oracle. In *De defectu oraculorum*, the god works through demigods, who employ vapours to make the soul receptive of impressions, and the soul acts through the body to speak the oracle (see table below). The two accounts are not identical, and some see *De Pythiae oraculis* as later and more polished.<sup>9</sup> But both dialogues affirm stimulation and deny possession.<sup>10</sup>

<i>De Pyth. or.</i>	god →			soul →	oracle
<i>De def. or.</i>	god →	demigod →	vapours →	soul →	oracle

These two dialogues furnish the categories for evaluating the theatre metaphor in *De Pyth. or.* 404B. Stimulation and possession prophecy are distinguished by who composes and delivers the words. In possession prophecy, the god is responsible for the wording, and he uses the Pythia as a passive medium (*De Pyth. or.* 397B–D; *De def. or.* 414E–F). In stimulation prophecy, the god provides a beginning or movement, but the Pythia herself determines the words (*De Pyth. or.* 397B–D; *De def. or.* 438C–D).<sup>11</sup> So, after summarizing the context of the theatre metaphor, the rest of the

<sup>8</sup> On the historical debate about the vapours, cf. Fontenrose (n. 1), 197–203; Flower (n. 1), 226; Johnston (n. 1), 47–50; Nissinen (n. 1), 198, 225–6.

<sup>9</sup> e.g. Fontenrose (n. 1), 199; though cf. Brenk (n. 6), 87 n. 3; Lambertson (n. 5), 159.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A. Timotin, *Trois théories antiques de la divination: Plutarque, Jamblique, Augustin* (Leiden, 2022), 75–6.

<sup>11</sup> Simonetti recently concluded similarly: ‘the prophetess is ... primarily responsible for the formal composition of the responses’: E.G. Simonetti, ‘The Pythia as matter: Plutarch’s scientific account of

article evaluates whether the metaphor portrays the god or the Pythia as determining and delivering the words of the oracle.

#### THE THEATRE METAPHOR IN *DE PYTHIAE ORACVLIS* 404B

The theatre metaphor appears in a section where Theon is complicating the question addressed by the dialogue as a whole—why the style of the oracles has changed from verse to prose—by suggesting that some oracles in the past were actually delivered in prose, and some in the present are still in verse (*De Pyth. or.* 403A–404B). Even, he hypothesizes, if all present oracles were in verse, then we would still be left with the problem of two different styles in the past, ‘at one time in verse [ποτὲ μὲν ἐν μέτροις] and at another time without versification [ποτὲ δ’ ἄνευ μέτρων]’ (404A). But for Theon what matters is not the style of the oracle but the manner of divine involvement: ‘Neither ... goes counter to reason if only we hold correct and uncontaminated opinions about the god’ (404B). The sentence at the centre of this article specifies one incorrect opinion about divine involvement that must be rejected.

[1] μὴ νομίζομεν

[2] αὐτὸν ἐκείνον εἶναι τὸν

[3] τὰ ἔπη συντιθέντα πρότερον

[4] καὶ νῦν ὑποβάλλοντα τῇ Πυθίᾳ τοὺς χρησμούς,

[5] ὥσπερ ἐκ προσωπειῶν φθεγγόμενον.

The two interpretative options are whether lines 4–5 refer to stimulation or possession prophecy. Both can roughly agree on lines 1–3: the god constructing or composing (συντίθημι) the words would constitute an undignified level of divine involvement. But on the first interpretation line 4 signals a transition to a more moderate level of divine involvement. What Theon denies is that *only now* this more dignified process characterizes the Pythian oracle, which could incorrectly be used to explain a transition from verse composed by the god to prose reformulating what the god suggests (ὑποβάλλω). The metaphor in line 5 depicts the god as a playwright speaking through actors, who put the divine will in their own voice. Lines 4–5 thus refer to stimulation prophecy. On the second interpretation line 4 completes the description of the undignified process Theon rejects. What Theon denies is that the god ever composes and then dictates (ὑποβάλλω) the oracles to the Pythia. The metaphor in line 5 depicts the god as an actor speaking through a mask, such that the words really belong to the god (the actor) and not to the prophetess (the mask). Lines 4–5 thus refer to possession prophecy.

The first interpretation, namely that lines 4–5 describe stimulation, is reflected in the translation of Babbitt: ‘We [must] hold correct and uncontaminated opinions about the god, and <sup>[1]</sup>[must] not believe <sup>[2]</sup>that it was he himself <sup>[3]</sup>who used to compose the verses in earlier times, <sup>[4]</sup>while now he suggests the oracles to the prophetic priestess <sup>[5]</sup>as if he were prompting an actor in a play to speak his words.’ Five considerations support this reading.

First, the phrase πρότερον καὶ νῦν may fit the two periods contrasted throughout the dialogue: the past, when oracles were delivered in verse, and the present, when oracles

are delivered in prose. Those two time periods are in view in the context (καθ' ἡμᾶς ... τῶν παλαιῶν), and the pair πρότερον and νῦν is used for two contrasting time periods in the other dialogue: 'in Boeotia, which in former times [ἐν τοῖς πρότερον χρόνοις] spoke with many tongues because of its oracles, the oracles have now [νῦν] failed completely' (*De def. or.* 411E). It is also possible that οὐδέτερον in 'neither of these ... goes counter to reason' (*De Pyth. or.* 404B) refers not to the styles of verse and prose but to the two temporal stages.<sup>12</sup> Together these readings of πρότερον καὶ νῦν and of οὐδέτερον could support the interpretation that Theon is describing an incorrect way of accounting for the temporal change: neither side of the change is problematic, as long as we do not explain the change in style by a change from possession to stimulation prophecy.

Second, ὑποβάλλω sometimes connotes subtlety or restraint in the sense of *suggesting*.<sup>13</sup> This could fit the more moderate view of divine participation in prophecy, where, rather than taking over, the god suggests his thoughts to the prophetess. In particular, Isocrates encourages his reader to attribute the author's admonitions, if they are of poor quality, to the author's old age, but if they are of high quality, to the influence of the divine (νομίζειν ... τὸ δαμόνιον ὑποβαλεῖν, *Phil.* 5.149).

Third, earlier in the dialogue, a similar construction unambiguously transitions from possession to stimulation prophecy: 'let us not believe that the god has composed them, but that he supplies the origin of the incitement' (*De Pyth. or.* 397B–C).

<i>De Pyth. or.</i> 397B–C	<i>De Pyth. or.</i> 404B
μὴ νομίζομεν	μὴ νομίζομεν
αὐτὰ πεποιηκέναι τὸν θεόν	αὐτὸν ἐκεῖνον εἶναι τὸν τὰ ἔπη συντιθέντα πρότερον
ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνου τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς κινήσεως ἐνδιδόντος	καὶ νῦν ὑποβάλλοντα τῇ Πυθίᾳ τοὺς χρησμούς

Fourth, the two participles (συντιθέντα ... ὑποβάλλοντα) take two different nouns (τὰ ἔπη ... τοὺς χρησμούς) as their objects. If two stages of formulating one set of oracles were in view, rather than two distinct processes, one might expect a single shared object.

Fifth, in Plutarch's extant writings, while προσωπεῖον refers to a *mask* in a theatre context (*De glor. Ath.* 6; *Comp. Ar. et Men.* 2; *Vit. Ant.* 29) or for a Dionysiac festival (*De cup. div.* 8), or to a *guise* one takes on (*De Her. mal.* 15), it also refers to a *character* in a play (*Comp. Ar. et Men.* 1). It is thus possible that ἐκ προσωπείων φθγγόμενον could refer to a playwright speaking through characters, or, by extension, to a director speaking through actors. Just as in stimulation prophecy the voice is that of the prophetess, not of the god (*De Pyth. or.* 397B–D), so in the theatre context it is that of the actor, not of the playwright or the dramaturge.

These five factors suggest that Babbitt's translation is a possibility. Even this evidence, however, is somewhat problematic. It is unlikely that οὐδέτερον refers to

<sup>12</sup> J. Holzhausen, 'Zur Inspirationslehre Plutarchs in *De Pythiae oraculis*', *Philologus* 137 (1993), 72–91, at 73.

<sup>13</sup> Pl. *Grg.* 491a; Plut. *Vit. Cor.* 21; cf. Polyb. *Hist.* 9.24.3.

two time periods because, immediately beforehand, μὲν ... δὲ contrasts ἐν μέτροις with ἄνευ μέτρων. And the temporal change under consideration is no longer from verse to prose but from mixed style (verse and prose) to verse only, which a change from possession to stimulation would not explain. Few of the uses of ὑποβάλλω with connotations of restraint appear in a public speech context, and the occurrence in Isocrates may not convey restraint at all if he supposes the possessive kind of poetic inspiration reflected elsewhere (Pl. *Ion* 534d) or is exaggerating. The comparable construction in *De Pyth. or.* 397B–C more explicitly indicates the transition from possession to stimulation prophecy by ἀλλά. And even interpreting προσωπεῖον as a character does not entirely work for stimulation prophecy because it is still the playwright who determines the words, even if the actor is the one delivering them.

The second interpretation, namely that lines 4–5 describe possession prophecy, is reflected in the translation of Goodwin: ‘We [must] have but a true and religious opinion of the Deity; <sup>[1]</sup>not irreverently conceiting <sup>[2–3]</sup>that formerly he composed a stock of verses <sup>[4]</sup>to be now repeated by the prophetess, <sup>[5]</sup>as if he spoke through masks and visors.’ Five factors indicate that this reading is more likely than the alternative.

First, the core of the denial is an identifying copula in the form of a declarative infinitive (ἐκεῖνον [= θεός] εἶναι). It is less about *what* is done than *who* does it: *we must not think that the god himself is the one who ...* The identifying function is only strengthened by the presence of an emphatic personal pronoun (αὐτόν), ‘stressing the identity of a person ..., in opposition to other persons’.<sup>14</sup> The construction thus directly addresses the distinction between the two kinds of inspiration based on who is responsible for composing the oracle. The infinitive is a denial of possession prophecy, and the rest of the sentence simply develops the denial. The present-tense form of the infinitive, itself thus simultaneous with the present tense of νομίζω, is important because it is the matrix for the tense forms of the following participles.<sup>15</sup>

Second, the two participles (συντιθέντα and ὑποβάλλοντα) are not contrasted. Both are present-tense forms, which, apart from other indicators, makes them simultaneous with the infinitive and with one another and incomplete in aspect.<sup>16</sup> They share one article (τόν). And they are linked by καί (cf. ἀλλά in *De Pyth. or.* 397B–C). Combined, those three features suggest continuity between the two participles, which together form the one substantive (τόν ... συντιθέντα ... καί ... ὑποβάλλοντα) that complements the infinitive: *the one who composes and dictates*.

One indicator, however, complicates this construal: the phrase πρότερον καὶ νῦν. It can be integrated in two ways. If it indicates that the first participle is anterior to the second, it distinguishes two stages of one process: *first A and now B*, not *before A but now B*. If the adverbs are paired in this phrase not to provide symmetry to the two participial constructions but to form one adverbial unit, then it modifies both

<sup>14</sup> E. van Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek* (Cambridge, 2019), §29.9. A similar construction (τόν θεόν αὐτόν) occurs in the denial of possession prophecy in *De def. or.* 414E, and Plutarch may be directly contesting the language for possession in other authors: ‘it is God himself who speaks [ὁ θεός αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ λέγων] ... through them’ (Pl. *Ion* 534d).

<sup>15</sup> Emde Boas et al. (n. 14), §§49.12–14, 51.2–4, 51.25–6, 52.4. νομίζω is the second finite verb of a habitual conditional marked by ἂν (contracted ἐόν through crasis), so its time is relative to the present tense of εἶμι (the only option in the infinitive) in the apodosis. Some suggest omitting or emending ἂν, which would make νομίζω a hortatory subjunctive and thus future in time, but the effect on the meaning would be negligible. See the Teubner edition and S. Schröder, *Plutarchs Schrift De Pythiae oraculis* (Stuttgart, 1990), 341–2.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Emde Boas et al. (n. 14), §§52.5, 52.49.

participles and signifies the two time periods addressed in the dialogue, likening rather than contrasting them: *then and now* or *either then or now*, not *then but now*. But the temporal distinction that *πρότερον καὶ νῦν* seems to create remains perhaps the most difficult element to integrate into this reading. For that reason, some suggest that it must be a late addition,<sup>17</sup> though without manuscript support.

Third, *ὑποβάλλω*, especially in the context of public communication, often means to dictate: to indicate to someone (dative) what (accusative) to say or write.<sup>18</sup> The one speaking or writing thus repeats what has already been scripted for them. The context of public speech strongly suggests that this is the meaning here: the god indicates to the Pythia (dative) what to say—namely, the oracles (accusative) that the god has already composed. The scriptedness of this sense of *ὑποβάλλω* corresponds well with possession prophecy.<sup>19</sup>

Several occurrences in Philo of Alexandria employ the dictation meaning of *ὑποβάλλω* specifically in the context of prophecy (see also *Somn.* 2.3; *Ios* 110; cf. *Praem.* 50):

Nothing of what [a prophet] says will be his own, for he that is truly under the control of divine inspiration has no power of apprehension when he speaks but serves as the channel for the insistent words of Another's prompting [καθάπερ ὑποβάλλοντος ἑτέρου]. For prophets are the interpreters of God, Who makes full use of their organs of speech to set forth what He wills. (*Spec.* 1.65; see 4.49)

[Balaam] advanced outside, and straightway became possessed, and there fell upon him the truly prophetic spirit .... Then he returned, and ... he spake these oracles as one repeating the words which another had put into his mouth [ὡσπερ ἑρμηνεὺς ὑποβάλλοντος ἑτέρου θεοπίζει]. ... He was suddenly possessed, and, understanding nothing, his reason as it were roaming, uttered these prophetic words which were put in his mouth [τὰ ὑποβαλλόμενα ἐξελάλει προφητεῶν]. (*Mos.* 1.277, 283)

Philo, a roughly contemporaneous author who is familiar with both stimulation and possession prophecy,<sup>20</sup> associates *ὑποβάλλω* with the decisive divine agency of possession prophecy.

Fourth, what is supplied to the Pythia is not a movement (*κίνησις*), a vision (*φαντασία*), or a light (*φῶς*), as elsewhere in stimulation prophecy (*De Pyth. or.* 397C), but the oracles themselves (*τοὺς χρησμούς*).

Fifth, *mask* is a more common meaning for *προσωπεῖον* than *character*, in Plutarch and in other authors, and that meaning fits much more naturally in the phrase as a whole (*φθεγγόμενον ἐκ +*). In possession prophecy, the prophetess determines the words of the oracle no more than a mask determines the words of an actor.<sup>21</sup> When Plutarch wants to make comparisons with other elements of the theatre, he is perfectly capable of saying so (*καθάπερ τραγικῶν ὑποκριτῶν, ὡσπερ οἱ τραγωδοὶ* and *ὡς ἐπὶ σκηνῆς* in *Vit. Demetr.* 18, 34, 41).<sup>22</sup> And another metaphorical use of *προσωπεῖον* in

<sup>17</sup> Schröder (n. 15), 343–4.

<sup>18</sup> e.g. Aeschin. *Tim.* 1.121, *Ctes.* 3.22; Isoc. *Panath.* 12.231; Lys. *In Agor.* 13.25; Philo, *Leg.* 259; Xen. *Cyr.* 3.3.55; perhaps Hom. *Il.* 19.80; cf. Diog. Laert. 1.57.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the scriptedness of even the playwright image in R. Flacelière (transl.), *Dialogues pythiques*, vol. 6 of *Plutarque: Œuvres morales* (Paris, 1974), 70 with n. 1.

<sup>20</sup> See D. Winston, 'Two types of Mosaic prophecy according to Philo', *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 2.2 (1989), 49–67.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Schröder (n. 15), 344; Valgiglio (n. 4), 167 n. 237.

<sup>22</sup> See also *Vit. Demetr.* 25, 28, 44. On these metaphors, C.B.R. Pelling, *Plutarch: Life of Antony* (Cambridge, 1988), 21–2.



Plutarch's extant works functions similarly to what is advocated here: 'He [Herodotus] has used Solon as a mouthpiece to revile the gods [τοῖς ... θεοῖς λοιδορούμενος ἐν τῷ Σόλωνος προσωπεῖῳ] .... By thrusting upon Solon his own ideas about the gods he is combining blasphemy with malice' (*De Her. mal.* 15; cf. *Vit. Ant.* 29). Here, Solon is a misleading disguise, hiding the true speaker, Herodotus, and in *De Pyth. or.* 404B a possessed prophetess is no more than a disguise for the true speaker, the god.

These five factors favour the second interpretation over the first. The syntax of the sentence, the meaning of ὑποβάλλω, and the phrasing of the metaphor do not support a transition from one kind of inspiration to another. And this reading fits into the reasoning of the immediate context: what matters to Theon is not what style we ascribe to the oracles at any given time, whether verse or prose, but what manner of agency we ascribe to the god.

### CONCLUSION

The theatre metaphor in *De Pyth. or.* 404B probably describes possession prophecy because it is the god, not the Pythia, who determines and delivers the words of the oracle. The theatre metaphor is not a flattering portrait for a god and may indicate other ways that possession prophecy is below Apollo's dignity, beyond implying crude immanence (*De def. or.* 414E–F). If an actor who imitates many characters is inherently fragmented in nature and thus cannot rule a city (*Pl. Resp.* 394–6),<sup>23</sup> then certainly the cosmos cannot flourish with an actor at the helm. If the prophetess is nothing more than a misleading guise, this may even make the god a deceiver (cf. *Plut. De Her. mal.* 15). Further, because Plutarch conceives of divine action in the Pythia and in the cosmos in analogous terms, as Simonetti has demonstrated,<sup>24</sup> perhaps the theatre metaphor illustrates one problem with the cosmologies Plutarch rejects. If the divine pervades and animates all matter, then the cosmos is a deceptive mask, and the creator is, at best, a fragmented leader incapable of establishing true justice and, at worst, maybe even a liar. The irony is that Plutarch, an officiant of the Delphic shrine, can disclose its sacred mysteries only through the voices of others in open-ended dialogues.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> On the relevance of this theme to Plutarch, see Lamberton (n. 5), 133.

<sup>24</sup> Simonetti (n. 5), 179–217; Simonetti (n. 11).

<sup>25</sup> See Lamberton (n. 5), 156–7, 160–1.