

T W O • Who Is a Seer?

So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you. Books can take you only so far in this field. It is a Gift granted to few.

PROFESSOR TRELAWNEY in J. K. Rowling,
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

A seer (*mantis*) was a professional diviner, an expert in the art of divination. There is no exact modern equivalent, since he or she combined the role of confidant and personal adviser with that of psychic, fortune-teller, and homeopathic healer. Yet this comparison is rather misleading, for seers, as we shall see, did not presume to “tell the future,” nor did they claim to possess a “paranormal” power that was independent of a god’s inspiration or dispensation. Since Greek religious terminology is inexact, the person called a *mantis* dealt with a broad range of religious activities—anything that a freelance religious expert might be expected to handle. The term also embraces an array of prophetic types, ranging from the upper-class professionals who accompanied generals on campaign to the possessed mediums at oracular sites to street-corner purifiers and dream interpreters. Despite the fact that both might lay claim to divine inspiration, there was no stage in Greek society in which the poet (*aoidos*) and the seer (*mantis*) were undifferentiated.¹ They always performed different functions and had very different social roles.

The Greek word *mantis* is variously translated as “prophet,” “diviner,” “soothsayer,” and, as I prefer, “seer.” Terminology is important, even if assigning names

1. The claim of Nagy (1990) that the word *mantis* had once been an appropriate designation for an undifferentiated poet-prophet is unsupported by linguistic usage and runs counter to the historical circumstances of the transmission of divination from the ancient Near East to Greece. Already in Homer, as Nagy himself points out, poet and prophet are distinct occupations.

is not a neutral activity. By choosing the English word “seer” I am giving preference to one set of cultural images over another. Nonetheless, consistency is vital, since to the Greekless reader the pervasiveness of the Greek *mantis* in texts of every genre is concealed by the variety of terms used in English to translate this single Greek word. There are, however, two exceptions to my use of “seer.” Anthropologists, as well as biblical scholars and Assyriologists, employ the term “diviner” when referring to the practitioners of technical, noninspirational divination (in contradistinction to figures whom they call “prophets”). Thus I have used the word “diviner” when discussing studies in those fields. Also, at the end of this chapter, when I contrast the seer with other “religious” types, I need to resort to the Greek word *mantis* in order to explicate the distinctions in our sources.

What does the word *mantis* actually mean? Etymologically, *mantis* derives from the Indo-European root *men and means “one who is in a special mental state” or “one who speaks from an altered state.”² Plato was probably correct in connecting *mantis* with *mania* (madness), which also comes from the root *men and means “a special mental state.” Thus the *mantis* is one who is in a special state of inspiration. To judge from the etymology, therefore, a *mantis* was originally a person who prophesied in an altered state of consciousness. Although there are other words in Greek that denote a seer (Homer, for instance, also uses *theopropos* and *thuoskoos*), *mantis* is by far the dominant term. Those other words, moreover, seem to be nearly synonymous with *mantis*. In the same sentence Aeschylus (*Sept.* 609–11) calls Amphiarus both *prophētēs* and *mantis*, and these titles are likewise used by Pindar (*Nem.* 1.61–62) of Teiresias.

By the classical period, the seer was also said to practice what the Greeks called a *technē*, the general word for “art,” “craft,” or “skill.” This art was called “the art of divination” (*mantikē technē*).³ Yet the notion that the seer was the practitioner of a specialized craft emerges as early as Homer. In a list of *dēmioergoi* (literally, “workers for the community”) at *Odyssey* 17.381–85, we find seer, doctor, carpenter, and inspired singer. These *dēmioergoi* are socially mobile “public workers” who travel from one *dēmos* (village) to another, and are sought after because of their specialized skills. Yet seercraft (*mantikē*) was not, like carpentry, a skill that just anyone could acquire and then hope to find gainful employment. Rather, like the singer who takes his inspiration from the Muses, a seer is the specialist to whom a god has

2. So Nagy 1990 and Maurizio 1995: 70. See also Chantraine 1974: vol. 3, 665, s.v. μάντις; Casevitz 1992; and Dillery 2005: 168–69. Roth (1982: 9–18) surveys the scholarship on this question.

3. For the term, see Aes. *PV* 484; Soph. *OT* 709; Hdt. 2.49, 83.

granted prophetic insight. And thus Solon, when writing of the different professions of mankind, observes “another has been made a seer by lord Apollo.”⁴

In the Greek world a seer, who operated by a combination of skill and charismatic inspiration, was the most authoritative expert on religious matters. Seers were religious specialists, or “agents of control within their religion’s symbolic universe.”⁵ Their competence was exceptionally broad, encompassing all of the various forms of divination that are found in our literary sources. These methods include the interpretation of the movements, behavior, and cries of birds (augury) and the interpretation of dreams and of portents (such as lightning, thunder, earthquakes, eclipses, and any unusual occurrences). The seer also examined the entrails of a sacrificial animal for marks and abnormalities of various kinds (extispicy), as well as interpreting the results of burning the entrails (empyromancy). As will be discussed more fully later on, in warfare two types of sacrificial divination were of immense importance: one was the campground sacrifice (called *hiera*), and the other was the battle-line sacrifice (called *sphagia*). Performing *hiera* entailed examining the victim’s entrails, especially the liver (the “victim” was usually a sheep), whereas performing *sphagia* consisted of slitting the victim’s throat (often a young she-goat) while observing its movements and the flow of blood. Ecstatic utterance was less common, but we shall see some examples of it.

And finally, there was spirit possession. This was chiefly, but not exclusively, associated with oracular centers, such as Delphi. Although the Pythia was the preeminent practitioner of so-called natural divination in the Greek world, there were other men and women who prophesied while being possessed by a god. All of them were “seers,” for the term *mantis* is applied by the poet Aeschylus to the Pythia as well as to Cassandra.⁶ The Sibyls too were *manteis*.⁷ Herodotus (2.55) calls the priestesses of the oracle of Zeus at Dodona in northern Greece *promanties*. Elsewhere Herodotus (8.135) uses the terms *promantis* and *prophētēs* synonymously to refer to the male prophet of the oracle of Apollo Ptous in Thebes.

Modern scholars are well aware that all of the various types of divination practiced in Greece, including extispicy, had originated in the ancient Near East and

4. *IEG*² vol. 2, Solon 13.53.

5. Rüpke 1996.

6. *Eum.* 29 and *Ag.* 1275.

7. Suda, s.v. Sibyla Chaldaia: “*Sibylla* is a Roman word, interpreted as “prophetess,” or rather “seer” (*mantis*); hence female seers (*mantides*) were called by this one name.”