

Crystal Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism. Oracles of the Gods*, Ashgate, 2014, pp. 352, £ 67.50, ISBN 9781409451525

Elsa Giovanna Simonetti, Università degli Studi di Padova, KU Leuven

When seeking an answer as to why “the sane, rational Greek” reached the hills of Delphi in order to listen to the “rantings of an old woman”, the brilliant classicist Simon Price first – and rightfully – warns us of the “dangers of making the Greeks too like ourselves” (S. Price, *Delphi and Divination*, 1985, p.131).

Crystal Addey follows the scholar’s suggestion faithfully by proving the insufficiency of modern conceptions of rationality and irrationality in the study of ancient ritual. *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism* does explore the connections between Platonic philosophy and oracles in the III-IV centuries A.D., assuming that the categories of cultic ritual and philosophical rationality are not mutually exclusive, but are both located along the same ample spectrum of religious-intellectual practices and reflections. Addey focuses on the extraordinary role played by divination in theurgy, by analysing in detail the works of Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus, and by carefully contextualizing them in Late Antique religious sensibility, culture and literary production.

Late Antique Neoplatonic divination emerges as informed by Platonic metaphysical, cosmological and gnoseological concepts. In line with J. Opsomer’s seminal contribution (*Divination and Academic ‘Scepticism’ according to Plutarch*, 1996), which stressed Plutarch’s view of faith in oracles and divination as a constant trait of Academic reflection, Addey demonstrates how, even in later times, theories on mantic phenomena were still drawn from Plato’s approval of inspired, god-sent divination (cf. Plat. *Phaedr.* 244a8-c3; *Leg.* VI 772d; V 738b3-e2; VIII 828a1-7; XI 914a1-7), performed by public oracles as well as by privileged individuals – as in the case of Socrates’ *daimonion* (cf. *Apology, Crito, Phaedo*).

Philosophy and religion are harmonized in the image of the Platonic philosopher as a prophet, hierophant and guardian of traditional pagan cults. One of the most attractive features of Addey’s approach is its capacity to reveal, from the biographical remarks onwards, the personal religious and ritual involvement

of the thinkers in question, even considering how their self-identity was shaped by the contemporaneous polemic against the Christians – a controversy in which oracles, as valuable sources of religious and philosophical truth, authority and legitimacy, clearly constitute a privileged target.

Chapter 1 provides a useful overview of preliminary key concepts, such as Addey's broad and comprehensive definition of "oracle" as "an inspired utterance thought to be derived from a supernatural source (usually a deity) and obtained through some form of ritual, frequently utilising mythical language and epic diction" (p.7).

Chapter 2 demonstrates how Porphyry conceives mystery cults, traditional religion and philosophy, as well as poetry and allegory, as interconnected and complementary forms of knowledge acquisition. Addey values the *Philosophy from Oracles* as a precious source for our understanding of Porphyry's philosophical and religious views, while dismissing (against J. Bidez) the idea of an evolution of his reflection from superstition to rationality, influenced by his encounter with Plotinus. Addey's originality consists in proposing that, besides its controversial nature, the *Philosophy from Oracles* presents *in nuce* theurgic ideas and conceptions, by conveying ritual instruction and soteriological content. The use of mystery terminology and imagery (already present in Plato's *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*) and the requirements of secrecy and ineffability, reveal more substantial affinities between philosophical-theurgic contemplation and mystery practices. Interestingly, Addey demonstrates how Porphyry's exegetical principles are founded on the idea, derived from Platonic metaphysical and ontological conceptions, of a divine and absolute truth concealed behind, and informing, earthly phenomena. Similarly, the authentic meaning of the text is hidden in riddles (αἰνίγματα) which, organised on multiple and cumulative levels, await deciphering.

Chapter 3 examines pagan and Christian views and debates on oracles. First, Addey warns that Eusebius' polemical agenda and biased perspective have influenced our reception of Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles*, largely preserved in his pseudo-objective selection included in the *Praeparatio Evangelica*. Despite the problematic relation between the *Philosophy from Oracles* and *Against the Christians*, and the uncertain role that this work may have played in Diocletian's persecution, Addey

proves how the *Philosophy from Oracles* was certainly perceived as a strongly anti-Christian work, and Porphyry as the anti-Christian Platonist *par excellence*, whose open, critical, disengaged approach towards the sources Eusebius mistook for naivety and incoherence.

Chapter 4 provides a new, original and convincing interpretation of Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* and Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*. Against E. Clarke and G. Shaw, and rather following A. Smith and M. Edwards, Addey dismisses the traditional idea that the two works represent a hostile attack by Porphyry on Iamblichus, as from a pure rational philosopher against a superstitious fellow. Rather, Addey effectively frames it as an equal exchange, written in the spirit of philosophical friendship and communal sympathy: Porphyry openly asks for a complete account of pagan religious practices, and obtains from Iamblichus, as from a "divine revealer" disclosing the secrets of theurgic practices, a thorough compendium of paganism and theurgy, also valuable against Christian polemicists. Wisely reassembling the pieces of the puzzle, Addey identifies the exchange as a mystagogic, philosophical dialogue, precious for educational, protreptic and initiatory purposes.

Addey here expounds the vital importance of considering the literary genre and structure of ancient works in order to clarify their aim and nature. Accordingly, she associates the exchange with two traditional philosophical genres: exegetical "Problems and Solutions" (ἀπορίαι καὶ λύσεις, ζητήματα) and Platonic dialogue, which implicitly echoes the oracular style. In addition, the connection between theurgy and Egyptian religious practices suggests a possible parallelism with the *Hermetica*, similarly characterized by an educational and initiatory character (cf. G. Fowden), and based on a graduated path of *paideia* directed to insight and assimilation to the divine.

Chapter 5 challenges the opposition between rationality and ritual based on post-Enlightenment thought-action dichotomies which, when applied to Neoplatonism, results in a misleading antithesis between the rational philosophical contemplation (θεωρία) of Plotinus and Porphyry and the theurgic activity (θεουργία) of Iamblichus, Proclus and later Neoplatonists.

Addey draws from recent, post-colonial, anthropological and religious studies (cf., for instance, T. Asad, M. Keller, S. Rangos) and especially from the research of Z. Mazur - particularly with regard to Plotinus' possible debt to some pre-

existing theurgic tradition. Mazur forges the expression “inner ritual” to describe non-discursive, transforming practices, such as Plotinus’ interiorised visualization (θεωρία) and Iamblichus’ theurgic highest stage (θεουργία): they both emerge as informed by metaphysical and cosmological notions (the concept of divine immutability, and the cosmological “axiom of continuous hierarchy”), associated with precise intellectual and ethical requirements.

The “correspondence rules” (p.185) of the modern philosophy of science, connecting observational to theoretical assumptions which include unobservable elements, allow for a sort of “instrumental model of rationality” (p.188), fitting the concept of ritual as a properly human means of pursuing coherent needs, according to culturally determined criteria.

Chapter 6 focuses on the third book of Iamblichus’ *De Mysteriis*, devoted to oracles and divine inspiration. Addey introduces two of the three main axioms which she assumes underlie Iamblichus’ reflection: first, the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of the divine; second, the theory of receptivity (ἐπιτηδειότης), i.e., the virtue of the perfect medium, attainable through ritual, ethical and intellectual practices. Addey stresses the link between individual receptivity and philosophical praxis, both oriented to humble respect towards the divine and awareness of human inferiority. She effectively describes the paradoxical character of Iamblichus’ divine possession, as a simultaneous descent of the god and the spiritual ascent of the individual, endorsed by his pre-ontological connection with the divine. The process is mediated by light, manifesting the divine presence in the world and bestowing mantic inspiration from without (ἔξοθεν) as a divine gift.

Chapter 7 describes the third pillar which, according to Addey, supports Iamblichus’ reflection. This is the idea of a hierarchical schema of simultaneous causative levels, and she employs it to explore Iamblichus’ definition of inductive and inspired divination, deeply rooted in Greco-Roman traditional culture, and in the Platonic distinction between human skill (τέχνη) and divine power (θεῖα δύναμις). The primary cause of inductive divination corresponds to human ability to capture divine signs (σημεῖα, σύμβολα) in sensible beings. Conversely, the primary and superior cause of inspired divination corresponds to the divine, whereas the secondary and instrumental cause

corresponds to human skills and receptivity, trained through a complex of ritual practices and an everlasting process of self-cultivation – akin to Eastern techniques of meditation. The ontological and ethical modifications transforming the human soul and consciousness during the last stage of theurgy (divinization) are linked to inspired divination, equal to divine possession, turning the philosopher into a prophet (μάντις), allowing for his mystical union with the divine as a supra-rational state, and entailing liberation from the chain of fate (εἴμαρμένη).

Contrasting P. Athanassiadi who, influenced by P. Brown's research on the Late Antique "holy man" (cf. P. Brown, *The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity*, 1971), emphasizes the preponderance of individual theurgy over institutionalized oracular rituals, Addey subsumes both practices (oracular and individual divination) under the prominent concept of the divine which, based on the unbroken continuity of cosmic reality, always exceeds both "person *and* space" (p.258).

In Chapter 8, Addey gives a complete account of the substantial, original and challenging results obtained in her analysis, finally proving how theurgic, oracular and divinatory rituals can *themselves* be conceived as divine symbols enclosing divine truths.

This soundly based, original and well-informed study provides an accurate overview of divination in Neoplatonism, occasionally broadening the scope to diverse divinatory techniques involved in ritual – such as *oneiromancy*, telestic ritual, *Homeromanteia*, and divination by numbers. It also emphasises the prominent role played by Delphi, Didyma and Claros, thus contributing to rejecting the idea of a decline in oracular activity after the Hellenistic period. In addition, in view of the emphasis placed on the intrinsically Platonic concepts informing theurgic ritual, Addey's work demonstrates a strong continuity within the Platonic tradition, indirectly acknowledging the precious intellectual contribution of Plutarch – writer of the *Delphic dialogues*, Platonic philosopher and priest of Apollo at Delphi – as an essential link between ancient and Imperial reflection.

This work, enriched by numerous quotations from the texts in question and directly engaging with ancient textual sources, considered in the light of their original historical and cultural settings, attests to an ever-growing interest in ancient ritual

practices, in particular oracles and divination, and to the need to dismiss the outdated label of “irrationalism” (cf. first E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 1984) in order to interpret these phenomena in new, more precise and more adequate terms.

Bibliography

Peter Brown, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity”, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 1971, 61, pp. 80-101.

Eric R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, 1984.

Jan Opsomer, “Divination and Academic ‘Scepticism’ according to Plutarch”, in *Plutarchea Lovaniensia*, edited by Luc van der Stockt, Peeters, 1996.

Simon Price, “Delphi and Divination”, in *Greek Religion and Society*, edited by Patricia E. Easterling and John V. Muir, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 128-154.

Website

<http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9781409451525>