

## Paul, Plutarch and the Gender Dynamics of Prophecy

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This article compares two first-century authors, Paul and Plutarch, on the mechanics of inspiration and the role of gender in the prophetic process. Paul's First Corinthians and Plutarch's Delphic Dialogues (*De Pythiae oraculis* and *De defectu oraculorum*) were written by men who were observers of and commentators on the religious phenomenon of prophecy – that is, the communication of divine messages through human speakers. They also make statements about women that indicate that gender influenced their perceptions of prophecy. When these authors discuss prophecy at the conceptual level, gender does not affect their arguments, but when they turn to actual women prophets, they introduce ideas about gender and sex that shape their views of the prophetic process and the women who prophesy.

**Keywords:** First Corinthians, *De Pythiae oraculis*, *De defectu oraculorum*, Delphic oracle, women's prophecy, inspiration, comparison

Plutarch, a Greek philosopher and priest at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, addressed a treatise called *Mulierum virtutes* (*Virtues of Women*) to a woman named Klea, who was a priestess at Delphi. He decided to write the essay after the funeral of a 'most excellent' woman named Leontis. He and Klea attended the funeral, and afterwards they began a conversation about the virtues of men and women. In the opening, he anticipates his argument – that the virtues of men and women are the same – by asking Klea to consider men and women in an activity about which she, as a Delphic priestess, may have known a lot.<sup>1</sup> He asks:

<sup>1</sup> On Klea's identity and education, see Philip A. Stadter, 'Philosophos kai Philandros: Plutarch's View of Women in the *Moralia* and the *Lives*', in *Plutarch's Advice to the Bride and Groom and A Consolation to his Wife: English Translations, Commentary, Interpretive Essays, and a Bibliography* (ed. S. B. Pomeroy; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 173–5; E. Kapetanopoulos, 'Klea and Leontis: Two Ladies from Delphi', *BCH* 90 (1966) 119–30; B. Puech, 'Prosopographie des amis de Plutarque', *ANRW* II.33.6: 4842–3. On Plutarch's priesthood, see his *Quaest. conv.* 3.700e, and an inscription from his tenure as priest, *CIG* 1713.

The poetic or prophetic art (ποιητικὴν ἢ μαντικὴν) is not one thing when produced by men and another when produced by women (ἀποφαίνοντες οὐχ ἕτεραν μὲν ἀνδρῶν ἕτεραν δὲ γυναικῶν οὐσαν), is it? And if we put the poems of Sappho side by side with those of Anacreon, or the oracles of the Sibyl with those of Bacis, will anyone have the power justly to impugn the demonstration because they lead the hearer, joyous and delighted, to belief? (*Mulier. virt.* 243B)<sup>2</sup>

Plutarch implies that poetic and prophetic activities are the same for men and women, but he does not thoroughly investigate the question. However, in two other texts, *De Pythiae oraculis* (*The Oracles of Delphi No Longer Written in Verse*) and *De defectu oraculorum* (*The Obsolescence of Oracles*), together commonly known as the ‘Delphic Dialogues’, he provides the most extended discussion of how prophecy worked at Delphi, the most famous oracular temple in the ancient Mediterranean world. The question, then, is: does gender influence his discussion of prophecy at Delphi in these texts, or are they consistent with his claim in *Mulierum virtutes* that the prophetic art is the same for men and women?

Plutarch’s question is intriguing for scholars familiar with another author who wrote about fifty years before him: the apostle Paul. Paul does seem to think that the ‘prophetic art’ is different for men and women. In 1 Corinthians, he suggests different behaviours and attire for men and women when they are ‘praying or prophesying’ (1 Cor 11.2–16). Later in the letter, he outlines instructions for order when prophets prophesy and speakers in tongues speak, and he silences women and excludes them from the categories of ‘prophets’ and ‘speakers in tongues’ (1 Cor 14.26–40).<sup>3</sup> These two passages

2 Translations of Greek texts are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

3 I consider 1 Cor 14.34–5 authentic. The textual evidence for interpolation is limited, and arguments for their interpolation often depend on the interpreter’s ideas about what is ‘consistent’ in Paul’s thought. The Western text tradition (D F G 88\* it<sup>d,6</sup>) often places vv. 34–5 after v. 40, and this placement – along with internal criteria – has caused scholars to suggest that Paul’s text did not include the verses in question (see G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 699–700). Other manuscripts that complicate the question are Codex Vaticanus (B), the twelfth-century minuscule 88 and the Latin Codex Fuldensis, which include scribal marks and transpositions (see P. B. Payne, ‘Fuldensis, Sigla for Variants in Vaticanus, and 1 Cor 14.34–5’, *NTS* 43 (1995) 250–9; P. B. Payne, ‘Vaticanus Distigme-Obelos Symbols Marking Added Text, Including 1 Corinthians 14.34–5’, *NTS* 63 (2017) 604–25). However, no manuscript omits 14.34–5, and those manuscripts that transpose the verses can be traced to a common archetype and geographical area (see G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A Disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953) 84–6; A. C. Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 150; C. Niccum, ‘The Voice of the Manuscripts on the Silence of Women: The External Evidence for 1 Cor 14.34–35’, *NTS* 43 (1997) 250–2). Because no manuscripts completely omit these verses, the exegetical decision for interpolation depends on internal factors: whether the verses break the logic of the argument in ch. 14 and whether they reflect Paul’s views on women.

imply, contra Plutarch, that in the Corinthian setting envisioned by Paul prophecy is different for men and women. But why and how is it different? How does gender differentiation, or expectations about how men or women act and speak, play a role in how authors understand and describe divinatory phenomena? I suggest that comparison of these two authors on the topic of prophecy demonstrates that social constructions of gender colour perceptions of prophecy, even as authors attempt to rationalise and order what was often seen as a mysterious and unruly practice.

The differences between these two authors include their cultural settings, positions in relation to their audience and topic, and rhetorical goals. Most importantly, they describe prophecy in distinct settings. In his philosophical treatises, Plutarch describes a Greek temple with a long history and substantial cultural influence where women had been prophets for a long time. Paul, on the other hand, responds in letters to a small, charismatic community of men and women. It is not clear where they would have gathered and performed prophecy and prayer – perhaps in a house or an open space in the city but definitely not in a majestic temple. Paul communicates a world-view that is new to the Corinthians and does so by reconfiguring ancient scriptures and traditions. Plutarch interprets a vast cultural memory attached to a prophetic institution and suggests ways that its evolution responds to cultural changes. As a philosopher influenced by Platonic thought, he seeks to rationalise prophecy, yet, as a priest, he seeks to uphold the institution and its mystique. Paul is the founder of a Corinthian community, to whom he provides advice. His own Jewish identity, as well as his interactions with Greek and Roman culture, influences his advice.

These differences throw into sharper relief the authors' similarity. They both analyse the mechanics of prophetic inspiration and interpretation. They are observers of and commentators on similar practices that are variants of a religious phenomenon: prophecy, the communication of divine messages through human speakers. In the process of observing and commenting on the religious phenomenon of prophecy, both authors observe and comment on social ordering, gender differentiation and hierarchy. In both the Delphic Dialogues and 1 Corinthians, gender difference shapes the ways the authors describe prophecy and, in Paul's case, the ways in which he makes recommendations for how his Corinthian audience should speak in the assembly. In what follows, I analyse how the performance of prophecy intersected with expectations of gender, at Delphi and at Corinth, for Plutarch and for Paul. I argue that when these authors discuss prophecy at the conceptual level, gender makes no difference, but when they consider actual women who prophesy, they introduce social ideas about gender and sex that shape their views of women's prophecy.

### 1. Plutarch: Women's Prophecy in the Greek Tradition

If a Greek person in the first century imagined a prophet, he or she would likely have pictured a woman.<sup>4</sup> Women were prophets at the most prominent oracular temples in Greece (Dodona, Delphi) and Asia Minor (Didyma).<sup>5</sup> There was, moreover, a conceptual connection between women and inspired prophecy and a collective affirmation that this religious role was vital to the well-being of society. Euripides, for example, articulated this connection in the fifth-century play *Melanippe Captive*. In a fragment of the play, the female title character defends women from criticism and highlights their role in prophecy:

Now as for dealings with the gods, which I consider of prime importance, we have a very great role in them. Women prophecy (προφητεύουσι) Apollo's mind in Phoebus' halls, and by Dodona's holy foundations, beside the sacred oak, womankind conveys the thoughts of Zeus to those Greeks who want to know it.<sup>6</sup>

Melanippe gives more attention to women's roles in religion, 'dealings with the gods', than to their roles in the household. Foremost is prophecy at the major oracular temples of Apollo ('Phoebus' halls') and Zeus ('Dodona's holy foundations'). The women at the oracles 'prophecy' (προφητεύω) the will of the gods and, in other texts, are called 'seer' (μαντις) or 'prophet' (προφήτις). The origins of prophetic rituals at these locations are hazy, but it is clear that organised institutions that were politically powerful emerged by the archaic period. It became an expected step for Greek leaders to consult the oracle at Delphi before they waged war or settled other lands.<sup>7</sup> By Plutarch's time, the political influence of Delphi had waned, but it remained the epitome of oracular speech.

Since Plutarch was a priest of Apollo at Delphi, he may have witnessed the oracular rituals and interacted with women who were prophets. What, then,

4 This section on Plutarch's Delphic Dialogues shares content with my *Women Praying and Propheying in Corinth: Gender and Inspired Speech in First Corinthians* (WUNT 11/448; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 117–26.

5 Male prophets are also attested at oracular temples in Klaros and Didyma. Didyma, in fact, changed from male to female prophets during the Hellenistic period, probably in response to the popularity of the Delphic female prophets. This change confirms the Greek conceptual connection between women and inspired divination. See S. I. Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) 76–90.

6 Euripides fr. 494 (Collard and Cropp, LCL 504), translation modified so that προφητεύω is rendered 'prophecy' rather than 'proclaim'. The fragment is from P.Berlin 5514 and a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus.

7 See H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (2 vols.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1956); J. E. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations, with a Catalogue of Responses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); R. Parker, 'Greek States and Greek Oracles', *Crux: Essays in Greek History* (ed. P. A. Cartledge and F. D. Harvey; Exeter: Duckworth, 1985) 298–326.

does he say about the gender dynamics of prophecy at Delphi? He does not directly answer the question that he poses in *Virtues of Women*: 'Is the prophetic art one art when practised by men and another when practised by women?' But expectations about women arise at points throughout his Delphic Dialogues and shape how he understands the language and mechanics of prophecy. The first text, *The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Written in Verse*, focuses on the language of oracular responses. In the past, the prophets gave oracles in verse, but in Plutarch's time they delivered them in prose. He asks: what caused the change? The second text, *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, asks why the temple provides fewer oracles than it did in the past.<sup>8</sup> Plutarch offers a few possible answers: people are no longer worthy of prophecy, population has declined, or the demigods or winds that inspire prophecy have moved away. In these dialogues, two issues arise when he discusses women prophets: (1) women's education and enculturation, distinct from men's, and (2) ideas about women's bodies and their sexuality.

In his comments on the mechanics of inspiration, Plutarch is indebted to Plato's definition of prophetic madness. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato defines three types of divine *μανία*: the poetic from the Muses, the prophetic from Apollo and the Bacchic from Dionysus. He writes:

For the prophet (*προφήτης*) at Delphi and priestesses at Dodona when they have been mad (*μανεῖσαι*) have caused many good things for Greece, for both individuals and the people, but few or none when they have been in their right minds (*σωφρονοῦσαι*). (*Phaedr.* 244a–b)

In his interpretation of Plato's *Phaedrus* in the treatise *Amatorius*, Plutarch follows this idea that the prophet is out of her mind during inspiration. Divine madness comes from outside the body, from a higher power, and 'displaces that which is logical and sensible' for a short amount of time (*Amat.* 758e). After this time of mental displacement, 'the Pythia [Plutarch's preferred term for the prophet] continues on into calm and tranquillity once she has left her tripod and its spirit' (*Amat.* 759b).

With regard to the calmness or madness of the prophet, Plutarch differs from Plato in that he portrays prophetic inspiration as requiring the active role of the prophet. Plato's argument that prophets and poets do not know what they produce implies a passive mental state, in contrast to the philosopher's active mind. For Plutarch, the prophet is not just a vessel into whom Apollo pours his

<sup>8</sup> For critical commentaries on these two texts, see R. Flacelière, *Dialogues Pythiques* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1974); S. Schröder, *Plutarchs Schrift De Pythiae oraculis: Text, Einleitung, und Kommentar* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1990). For dating, see R. M. Ogilvie, 'The Date of the *De defectu oraculorum*', *Phoenix* 21.2 (1967) 109. Based on internal and external evidence, Ogilvie suggests a date of composition for *De defectu oraculorum* between 95 and 115 CE. Since the two Delphic dialogues are related, *De Pythiae oraculis* was probably written around the same time.

prophecy; rather, she is responsible for the language of oracles and the control of her inspiration. In *The Oracles at Delphi*, the discussion begins with the complaint that a certain oracle is not as elegant as some poetry composed by human authors (*Pyth. orac.* 396c). One speaker in the dialogue responds by saying that the god does not actually compose oracles. Rather, he places visions into the mind of the prophet, and she vocalises them based on her own abilities. Similarly, in *Obsolescence*, Plutarch argues that the god does not act as a ventriloquist or employ the prophet's mouth as an instrument (*Def. orac.* 414e). Rather, the god places visions and light into her soul (*Pyth. orac.* 397c). These visions result from ἐνθουσιασμός, 'the god within' or 'inspiration'. Divine communication occurs inside the body and soul, and the prophet's mind must then transform what it sees into human language.

To express the interaction between prophet and spirit, Plutarch likens the god's communication through the prophet to an object floating in water: its movements appear to be erratic and circular, but its nature, in combination with external forces, dictates the movement. Likewise, the priestess may look out of her mind, but the god is moving her natural abilities into action. Her mind participates in the process and shapes the language of the oracle. The body is also key to the process: ritual cleansing before the prophetic session allows the soul to relax so that it can 'wander amid the irrational and imaginative realms of the future' (*Def. orac.* 432c). This movement of the soul requires a mind that is stable and capable of allowing the soul to experience inspiration. Sometimes, the body itself is able to attain this state, but at other times it needs an outside stimulus. In the case of Delphi, 'the prophetic breath', τὸ μαντικὸν πνεῦμα, from the earth prompts inspiration (*Def. orac.* 433d–e).

The god communicates to the prophet through this complex process involving spirits and body. The prophet must then communicate the god's message to human beings, and this is where questions of language and interpretation arise. On this side of the communication chain, versification is the key issue. *The Oracles at Delphi* begins with a critique of the 'barrenness and cheapness' of the language of the current priestesses (*Pyth. orac.* 396c–d). Lack of verse caused people to question the truth of the prophet's speech and whether the god remained at the site. Plutarch suggests two reasons why the prophet no longer speaks in verse. First, the adaptation of language, attributed by Plutarch to both the god and the priestesses, responded to the needs of men (*Pyth. orac.* 406e–f, 407d). In prior days when kings consulted the oracle about political actions and wars – highly charged activities – indirect statement and ambiguity were necessary. He writes: 'It was not advantageous for those concerned with the oracle to distress and provoke those men to hatred through hearing many things that they did not want' (*Pyth. orac.* 407d).<sup>9</sup>

9 In a similar vein, and informed by modern anthropological studies, Lisa Maurizio argues that 'the Pythias responded to colonists' needs by mirroring them: the Pythias developed a "style",

A second reason for the adaptation of oracular language is the changing nature of the prophets' abilities, due to personal differences and cultural transformations. Plutarch suggests that prophetic spirits interact 'with each person according to the art or ability that she possesses' (ἐκάστω καθ' ἣν ἔχει τέχνην ἢ δύναμιν, *Pyth. orac.* 405a). He continues: 'Some abilities and natures (δυνάμεις καὶ φύσεις) are created for some purposes and others for others, and each one is moved to action in a different way, even if the one that moves them all is one' (*Pyth. orac.* 405b). This statement is similar to Paul's concept of how spiritual gifts work within a diverse community (1 Cor 12.11), which I discuss below. They are distinct in that Plutarch does not consider the workings of spirits in a communal setting, as Paul does. Rather, Plutarch is concerned with how the variety of oracular language reconciles with the consistency of the god who inhabits the shrine. Variety and unity coexist in Delphic prophecy because prophets, not the god, vary in their art and abilities.

To illustrate how spirits act upon different people in different ways, Plutarch discusses the current Delphic priestess. This is the point at which issues of gender and sexuality arise in his interpretation of the language and mechanics of prophecy. This priestess is an example of the natural aptitudes prophets possess. She comes from a peasant background and 'brings nothing with her from technical skill or of any other experience or faculty, as she goes down into the oracle' (τραφεῖσα δ' ἐν οἰκίᾳ γεωργῶν πενήτων οὐτ' ἀπὸ τέχνης οὐδὲν οὐτ' ἀπ' ἄλλης τινὸς ἐμπειρίας καὶ δυνάμεως ἐπιφερομένη κάτεισιν εἰς τὸ χρηστήριον, *Pyth. orac.* 405c). Plutarch compares her to Xenophon's ideal bride, from the fourth-century text on household management, the *Oeconomicus*. According to Xenophon, a bride should be educated by her husband after she enters his household. Plutarch writes:

But just as Xenophon thinks that a bride ought to have seen and heard as little as possible before she proceeds to her husband's house, so also this virgin (παρθένος), inexperienced and uninformed about almost everything, as a pure soul, becomes joined with the god (τῷ θεῷ σύνεστιν). (*Pyth. orac.* 405d)

Within the context, the point is that the prophet has no technical or artistic education. She does not know how to create eloquent verse or have the capacity for embellished language. The point is not sexuality, but by drawing the analogy to a bride and using the term 'virgin' (παρθένος), Plutarch introduces a sexual

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ambiguity, that traced the colonists' desire to make the unknown readable by replicating it in language' (L. Maurizio, 'The Voice at the Center of the World: The Pythias' Ambiguity and Authority', *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voice in Greek Literature and Society* (ed. A. Lardinois and L. McClure; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 42). See also L. Walsh, 'The Rhetoric of Oracles', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 33.3 (2003) 55-78.

interpretation of the process.<sup>10</sup> She is sexually pure, which makes her an appropriate recipient of the god's inspiration, envisioned as sexual intercourse. Plutarch thus overlays the priestess's rural upbringing and lack of technical skill with the sexual analogy for the prophetic process.

By contrast, past priestesses prophesied in poetry. 'That time', he says, 'produced personal temperaments and natures which had an easy fluency and a bent towards composing poetry' (*Pyth. orac.* 405e). Education of girls in classical Greece included instruction in poetry, singing and dancing, among other things.<sup>11</sup> Plutarch registers a cultural shift in language that hints at the changes in the education of women. He thinks that the prophet's current style is a change for the better. He writes:

As for the language of the Pythia, just as the mathematicians call the shortest of lines between two points a straight line, so also her language makes no bend nor curve nor doubling nor ambiguity, but is straight to the truth; yet, in relation to faith in it, it is unstable and subject to questioning, but as yet, under cross-examination, it has given up nothing. (*Pyth. orac.* 408f)

The issue is people's faith in the Pythia's words, not their lack of truth. Again, interpretation is the source of problems. If an oracle seems false, the problem is with the inquirer and interpreter, not the prophet or the god.<sup>12</sup>

In a second story about an actual priestess who died not long before his writing (ὥσπερ ἴσμεν ἐπὶ τῆς ἔναγχοϋ ἀποθανούσης Πυθίαιας, *Def. orac.* 438a), Plutarch again emphasises the sexual abstinence of the prophet, and hence the sexual interpretation of prophetic inspiration. Within its context, the point of this story is the necessity of the proper state of body and soul before the prophetic

10 Plutarch is not alone in the sexual interpretation of prophecy and emphasis on the prophet's virginity. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl.* 14.26.2–6, also emphasises the virginity in the origin myth of Delphi. Portrayals of the prophet Cassandra suggest that her inspiration comes from sexual intercourse with Apollo: Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1202–13; Virgil, *Aen.* 2.402. Similarly, the Sibyl's inspiration resembles sex with the god: Ovid, *Metam.* 14.101. Plutarch's emphasis on virginity may be influenced by the famous virginal priestesses of Vesta in Rome (see Plutarch, *Num.* 9–10). The 'Vestal Virgins' certainly influenced the Latin author Lucan's portrayal of the Delphic priestess in Lucan, *Bell. civ.* 5.142–93. On the Vestals, see C. Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 7–21, 70–81.

11 C. Calame, 'Sappho's Group: An Initiation into Womanhood', *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* (ed. E. Greene; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 117 discusses the possibility of a 'school' in which Sappho taught young women to compose and sing poetry. For philosophical and rhetorical perspectives on the education of girls, see Plato, *Resp.* 451c–461e; *Leg.* 7.804E; Musonius Rufus 3–4; Martial 10.35; Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.1.6–20; Cicero, *Brut.* 58.211.

12 This is essentially what the prophet at Delphi tells King Croesus when he confronts her about an 'inaccurate' oracle that led him to defeat on the battlefield: Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.91.



session. Disturbances of the body ‘filter into her soul’ (*Def. orac.* 437d). Philosophical and medical concepts of the porosity of the body, especially women’s bodies, probably influence Plutarch’s account of this priestess’s tragic possession.<sup>13</sup> A state of emotion and instability incapacitates the imaginative faculty that allows visions. In this case, the sacrifices before the consultation did not produce the proper results, which caused the prophet’s reluctance. Plutarch writes: ‘She descended into the oracular shrine (τὸ μαντεῖον), they say, unwillingly and half-heartedly’ (*Def. orac.* 438b). Her emotional agitation from seeing the failed sacrifice resulted in ‘harshness of her voice’, violent movements and death. Plutarch makes it clear that this is an unusual case: Her inspiration was ‘confusing, not uncontaminated, and disturbing’ (*Def. orac.* 438a). Frenzy and erratic responses are uncommon, and even dangerous.<sup>14</sup> He concludes:

On account of these things, they guard the Pythia and her intercourse and keep her body holy and her life wholly free from social contact and association with strangers, thinking that it is clear to the god when she has the temperament and disposition suitable to submit to inspiration (τὸν ἐνθουσιασμόν) without harm. (*Def. orac.* 438c)

The problematic sacrifice, as well as contact with outsiders, endangers the prophet during her communication with the god. Emotional agitation and impurity of the body result in a soul not able to receive inspiration. The mention of the priestess’s purity is unnecessary to this particular episode, since the sacrifice causes the problem. Her abstinence from sexual or social contact, moreover, is unremarkable, since it was a ritual requirement for many Greek priesthoods, whether male or female, and not unique to the prophets at Delphi.

Before turning to Paul’s discourse on gender and prophecy, we may answer Plutarch’s question about the significance of gender difference for prophecy. Plutarch does not directly address the female identity of the Delphic prophet. It is a historical and cultural given for him. He implies that prophecy would be the same for a man or woman. At the same time, the social realities of

13 Drawing on Plato, Hippocrates and Galen, D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 139–53 discusses ancient medical and philosophical views of body porosity. Female bodies were viewed as more porous than male bodies, which meant that they were more susceptible to pollution.

14 New Testament scholars often use this passage as proof of frenzy in the Delphic prophetic tradition. Plutarch’s clear statement that this is not how the process usually unfolds should caution against such scholarly conclusions. See e.g. H. Conzelmann, *Erster Korintherbrief* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969) 276–80; T. Callan, ‘Prophecy and Ecstasy in Greco-Roman Religion and in 1 Corinthians’, *NovT* 27 (1985) 125–40; T. Jantsch, ‘Die Frau soll Kontrolle über ihren Kopf ausüben (1Kor 11:10)’, *Frauen, Männer, Engel: Perspektiven zu 1 Kor 11,2–16* (ed. T. Jantsch; Göttingen: Neukirchener Theologie, 2015) 131–8.

enculturation and education influence the prophetic process, oracular language, and Plutarch's observation of them. These variables introduce gender difference into prophecy, since education differed for men and women. Moreover, since the prophet's body is crucial to the process, the femaleness of the Delphic prophets influences his portrayal of them. This results in sexualised interpretations of the prophetic process. Plutarch emphasises the prophet's abstinence from sexual contact and uses the trope of the prophet as the virginal bride of Apollo. As a viewer of prophecy, Plutarch was susceptible to gendered tropes that shaped his view of women who prophesied.

## 2. Paul: Gendered Prophecy in Corinth

Now, I cross the Corinthian Gulf, from Delphi to Corinth, to Paul's 1 Corinthians.<sup>15</sup> With Plutarch, it is clear where the prophetic activity that he describes occurred. With Paul, however, this is more difficult to determine. It could have taken place in houses or open areas, such as gardens, association buildings or even the shops in which he worked as a tentmaker.<sup>16</sup> Paul's experiences with inspired speech, as well as with male and female prophets in Corinth, would have influenced his knowledge of prophecy.

As was his practice, Paul founded the Christ community in Corinth and then continued to communicate with them in his absence through letters. A central task of scholarship on 1 Corinthians is the historical reconstruction of the situation in Corinth, drawing from Paul's statements and the historical setting.<sup>17</sup> Scholars have seen in Corinth a community that embraced the spirit 'in speech and knowledge' (1 Cor 1.5) and perhaps even considered themselves πνευματικοί, 'spiritual

15 Some of my analysis of 1 Corinthians here is from my *Women Praying and Prophesying in Corinth*, 175–6, 185–6, 220.

16 For possible meeting spaces, see J. Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983); D. Schowalter, 'Seeking Shelter in Roman Corinth', *Corinth in Context: Comparative Studies on Religion and Society* (ed. S. J. Friesen, D. N. Schowalter and J. C. Walters; Leiden: Brill, 2010) 327–42; A. Weissenrieder, 'Contested Spaces in 1 Corinthians 11:17–33 and 14:30: Sitting or Reclining in Ancient Houses, in Associations, and in the Space of *ekklesia*', *Contested Spaces: Houses and Temples in Roman Antiquity and the New Testament* (ed. D. L. Balch and A. Weissenrieder; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 59–108. J. Økland, *Women in their Place: Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Sanctuary Space* (LNTS 269; London: T&T Clark, 2004) discusses these spaces in Corinth with reference to gender separation and hierarchy.

17 E.g. F. C. Baur, 'Die Christus Partei in der Korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz des petrinischen Christentums in der alten Kirche, der Apostel Petrus in Rom', *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie* 5 (1831) 61–206; J. C. Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 1965); G. Theissen, 'Soziale Schichtung in der korinthischen Gemeinde: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des hellenistischen Urchristentums', *ZNW* 65 (1974) 232–72.

ones'.<sup>18</sup> Relationships between and expectations of men and women play into this Corinthian self-understanding, as seen in the issues of sex and marriage in chs. 5–7 and of spiritual gifts in chs. 11–14.<sup>19</sup> I focus on the latter.

When most New Testament scholars analyse prophecy and speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians, they discuss chs. 12–14. Chapter 12 begins with what seems like a transition and introduction of a new topic: 'Now, concerning spiritual things (πνευματικά)'. Paul has, however, already introduced inspired speech in 1 Corinthians 11 when he writes: 'Every man who prays or prophesies with something on the head shames his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with uncovered head shames her head.' The verbs for praying and prophesying (προσεύχομαι, προφητεύω) are clustered in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and link the two chapters as the beginning and end of a discrete argument.<sup>20</sup> Also linking these chapters are statements about whether and how women should speak in the assembly. In this letter, the topics of gender and prophecy are intertwined, and Paul's ideas about the social ordering of men and women complicate his statements about the communication of spiritual messages.

Paul's ideas about the mechanics of prophetic inspiration emerge most clearly in ch. 12. Its opening demonstrates how Paul is in conversation with broader cultural patterns for analysing prophetic inspiration and interpretation. He writes: 'You know how when you were ἔθνη you were led off and carried away again and again to voiceless idols (τὰ εἴδωλα τὰ ἄφωνα)' (12.2). He orients his argument in terms of what his audience knows about their prior religious experience. The passive voice of the verbs, 'enticed and carried away', and the repetition, 'again and again', indicates the passive state of the inspired person. The 'voiceless idols' are also passive: they do not initiate the action, but instead are the objects to which the Corinthians were carried. Here, Paul reflects ancient discussions about the activity or passivity of inspired prophets. Recall Plutarch's analogy of an object floating on water and how both god and prophet share responsibility for the language of oracles. By contrast, Paul views outside cults as completely passive: neither the person nor the god is truly in control.

Paul does provide one point of continuity between the Corinthians' previous religious experiences and their current experiences: the content of an utterance indicates its authenticity and its divine provenance. Paul presents two statements:

18 A. Thiselton, 'Realized Eschatology at Corinth', *NTS* 24 (1978) 510–26. L. Nasrallah, *An Ecstasy of Folly: Prophecy and Authority in Early Christianity* (HTS 52; Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School, 2004) argued that Paul's focus on prophecy, madness and rationality in 1 Corinthians was part of emerging Christianity's disputes about knowledge and authority in the community.

19 Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets*, brought women and gender issues to the forefront in her reconstruction of Corinthian self-understanding.

20 προσεύχομαι: 11.4, 5, 13; 14.13, 14 (× 2), 15 (× 2); προφητεύω: 11.4, 5; 13.9; 14.1, 3, 4, 5 (× 2), 24, 31, 39.

Ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς, 'Jesus is a curse', and Κύριος Ἰησοῦς, 'Jesus is Lord'. These statements demonstrate what his audience already knows about judging inspired speech. In Greek practice, visual or aural evidence of inspiration by a god or spirit – perhaps trancelike behaviour or erratic speech – did not always accompany or verify communication from a god. People who received oracles evaluated their language and interpreted them to determine the proper response.<sup>21</sup> The statement in 1 Cor 12.3 provides examples of how speech is connected to its divine source. If someone says, 'Jesus is a curse', the Corinthian hearer knows that the spirit of God has not inspired that person, even if he or she claims the spirit. This knowledge is not based on the speaker's behaviour but on whether the statement is congruent with what the hearer knows about the Holy Spirit.

As he develops his arguments in chs. 13 and 14, Paul characterises inspired speech as 'the tongues of humans and angels' (13.1), 'speaking into the air' (14.9), 'speaking as a foreigner or barbarian' (14.11) and 'being out of one's mind' (14.23). These statements are situated within discourse that attempted to understand prophecy in the first-century Mediterranean world. Plutarch, for instance, discusses the roles of demigods, winds and breaths at Delphi.<sup>22</sup> Plato views the prophets at Delphi and Dodona as being out of their minds (μαίνομαι) and derived the term μαντῖς ('seer') from μανία ('madness', *Phaedr.* 244a–b). Moreover, the arguments in these chapters emphasise the interpretation of messages from God, whether in prophecy or tongues. Prophecy requires someone who can 'judge spirits' (διακρίσις πνευμάτων). Tongue speaking requires an inspired interpreter who can transform the 'mysteries' (14.2) into something the community can understand. Similarly, the Delphic prophet both received prophetic visions and translated them for her audience. For Paul, interpretation is an act of the mind, while speaking in tongues is an act of the spirit (14.13–15). Both of these actions are necessary in the community's communication with God.

When he discusses the language of oracles at Delphi, Plutarch is concerned that the change from verse to prose threatened the constancy of the god at the temple. Similarly, Paul addresses the variety of spiritual gifts and what this diversity says about the god that inspires the Corinthians (12.4–31). Like Plutarch, Paul explains this problem by emphasising the different capabilities that individuals have. The same god energises the many abilities of people, including gifts of prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues (12.10). For Paul, the metaphor of the communal body bolsters this argument: just as bodies do, the community simultaneously has unity and variety. Rather than

21 For various processes of evaluation and interpretation of prophecy, see Strabo, *Geogr.* 9.2.4; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl.* 16.26.2–3 and 27.1; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.20.27; Plutarch, *Def. orac.* 438a–c.

22 See also Cicero, *Div.* 1.19.37–8.

prophetic spirits working on the body of one prophet, as Plutarch witnesses at Delphi, Paul envisions a spirit working within a corporate body, made up, presumably, of male and female.

This idea that the spirit works within a communal body introduces consideration of gender difference into Paul's understanding of the mechanics of inspiration and the interpretation of prophecy and tongues. Paul does not first introduce the body metaphor in ch. 12 when he addresses spiritual gifts. Rather, the body metaphor emerges initially in ch. 11, where he introduces practices of praying and prophesying, as well as differences between men and women. This is a notoriously difficult passage – in terms of vocabulary, syntax and argumentation – which is, I think, indicative of the complex situation in Corinth.

The difficulties in ch. 11 stem from Paul's ambivalence between his overarching argument for an interdependent communal body, on the one hand, and a bias towards gender differentiation and hierarchy, on the other.<sup>23</sup> One of Paul's controlling arguments in the letter is for communal mutuality based on one way of framing the body of Christ metaphor. The subject of gender, however, is connected to cultural hierarchy that becomes explicit when Paul employs the body metaphor with an emphasis on headship, as he does in 11.3: 'The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.'

Paul's conflicted position between arguments for gender hierarchy and communal interdependence comes to the foreground in vv. 7–12. Paul refers to the Genesis creation narratives to articulate the relationships between men and women and to conclude, in an unusual Greek phrase: 'women ought to have authority upon the head (ἐξουσίαν ἔχειν ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς)'.<sup>24</sup> In vv. 7–9, Paul alludes to the creation narrative in Genesis 1, humans created in the image of God, and in Genesis 2, woman created from man's body. He suggests a hierarchical understanding of the order of creation and downplays the idea that both women and men were created in God's image. The creation argument in vv. 7–9 reinforces the hierarchy of v. 3 and supports the idea that social differences between men and women are not abandoned in Christ.

23 Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 3–34 argues that this gendered hierarchy is related to philosophical and medical concepts of the physiological inferiority of women.

24 Many early translations in place of ἐξουσία effectively read κάλυμμα, 'covering' or 'veil', which indicates the difficulty of the Greek phrase and early attempts to make sense of it within the argument of 1 Cor 11.2–16. See textual witnesses in NA<sup>28</sup>; B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994) 562; Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles*, 223. This reading, essentially, understands ἐξουσία to mean 'a symbol of someone else's authority', but this passive use of ἐξουσία is not attested elsewhere. Moreover, the combination of ἐξουσία and the preposition ἐπὶ with the genitive is uncommon. See LSJ and BADG s.v. ἐξουσία; P. Arzt-Grabner *et al.*, *1. Korinther: Papyrologische Kommentare zum Neuen Testament*, vol. II (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006) 390.

This argument, however, does not sit well for Paul because he envisions a communal ethic that is interdependent rather than hierarchical. In vv. 11–12, he modifies his argument to emphasise the mutuality of women and men. Not only do these verses correct his argument for hierarchy, they also correct potential arguments for the dissolution of social differences, which may include abandoning signs of gender (clothing, hairstyles) and allowing women and men to participate in ritual speech together. These verses have the symmetry and rhythm of a tradition or creed. Rather than ‘no longer male and female in Christ Jesus’, Paul teaches the Corinthians, ‘Woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman in the Lord.’ At creation, man’s body provided the stuff to create woman’s body. In current human existence, women’s bodies give birth to infants. These differences in bodies provide Paul’s rationale for gender interdependence. But, as though he knows that his arguments have not been persuasive, Paul concludes with appeals to ‘custom’ and to what is ‘natural’ and ‘proper’ – in essence, the status quo. He then sets aside ‘the woman question’ for most of the discussion of spiritual speaking in chs. 12–14.

Paul returns to the explicit reference to women in the closing section, 1 Cor 14.26–40, and states that women should not speak in the assembly. After the more philosophical discussion of language and inspiration in the first part of ch. 14, Paul gives concrete instructions for retaining order: first, for those who speak or pray in a tongue (vv. 27–8); second, for prophets (vv. 29–33); and third, for women (vv. 34–5). Each of these instructions includes a third person imperative and a condition. To speakers in tongues and prophets, ‘Let them speak.’ If no one can interpret or another person receives a revelation, ‘Let them be silent.’ The instruction for women reverses the pattern: Paul begins, ‘Let them be silent.’ If they must learn, ‘Let them ask their own men at home.’ For women, the silencing is not conditional, as it is for male speakers in tongues or prophets. ‘Shame’ is the reason for silence: Paul uses the adjective ‘shameful’ (αἰσχρός) only in these two passages about women speaking (11.6; 14.35). In ch. 11, Paul identifies two groups of people – men and women – who do two activities: praying and prophesying. At the end of ch. 14, he distinguishes between three groups of people: speakers in tongues, prophets and women. Each group has its own activity and order. Women are removed from the groups that can speak.

Something about women’s prophesying and praying in Corinth displeases Paul, which leads him to make the difficult argument in ch. 11. His theological preference for communal interdependence and his socio-cultural preference for gender hierarchy are at odds, leading to a messy argument with an unclear solution. He then turns to another issue, the Lord’s Supper, before returning to praying in tongues and prophesying – here excising the ‘woman question’ from the discussion. After working through the issues of prophecy and prayer, including the mechanics of inspiration and interpretation, he outlines a communal

order, wherein he returns to the original issue of women praying or prophesying and says, 'Be silent.' For Paul, prophecy is not the same thing for a man and a woman: it is not for a woman. This pronouncement would have been jarring for Corinthian women who experienced the spirit of God, prophesied and knew women to be prophets in their cultural context. It would cause, or even require, such women to re-evaluate all of Paul's arguments about inspired speech. Up to this point, they can hear his address to 'all' of the Corinthians, including them, but at the end of the discussion of inspired speech Paul has drastically changed the landscape for prophecy.

### Conclusion

Did Paul or Plutarch think prophetic inspiration was different for men and women? When these authors work on the conceptual, abstract level – that is, when they describe how spirits interact with bodies and minds – they do not suggest that gender makes a difference. However, when they move to the concrete consideration of prophecy by a person or persons in particular bodies, issues of sex and gender arise. When Plutarch pictures two recent woman prophets, he uses the sexual analogy for the prophetic process. He characterises prophets as virginal brides of the god, a stereotype that precedes him and continues on after him. When Paul deals with the actions of the Corinthians and moves from theological description of religious phenomena to concrete instructions about how the community should practise such phenomena, he advocates for the hierarchy of men and women (1 Cor 11.2–16) and, ultimately, the exclusion of women (1 Cor 14.34–5). The movement from abstract to concrete introduces stereotypes and constraints upon women's behaviour.

For both authors, social constraints – not their theology, philosophy or anthropology – make prophecy different for men and women. Plutarch's question, which initiated this essay, reveals his impulse to show philosophically that men and women are the same. Yet, in the proofs for his thesis in the *Virtues of Women*, he makes claims about women that show that he views them as fundamentally different. Paul has a theological impulse towards unity and seeks this unity in the diversity of the community, as articulated in the body metaphor of 1 Corinthians 12. Yet, in practical matters, as in 1 Corinthians 14, he does not fully tolerate the messiness that diversity can bring to the assembly.

Unfortunately, there is not a treatise by Klea of Delphi about Delphic prophecy or a letter from the deacon Phoebe about Corinthian prophecy. But we may imagine their responses to the men who explain to them activities that they do regularly and know intimately. After the funeral, when Plutarch starts to talk about how the prophecy of men and women is the same, Klea may say something like, 'Yes, Plutarch, that sounds like a very interesting topic, but I have to get

home. Maybe you could write me a treatise?' The Corinthian women may not have been so reluctant to ruffle feathers. If prophecy were central to their religious identity, they may have rejected Paul's suggestion that they be silent. 'He wants us to ask our husbands at home? But we can speak with God! We have the word of God, just like he does.' Their response may have led to a 'letter of tears' (2 Cor 2.3-4; 7.8) – both theirs and Paul's – and the degradation of their relationship, a situation that is evident in much of the vitriol in 2 Corinthians.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, God and the gods spoke a lot, and often in the voice of a woman – a reality quite different from Paul's 'voiceless idols' (1 Cor 12.2). Since these religious practices were not separate from social and cultural expectations of men and women, gender dynamics influence how they took place and how authors understood them. This comparative study shows that for both Paul and Plutarch, in their own distinct ways, the prophetic art was indeed different for a woman.