

2003

## Prophecy and Poetry: The Cumaean Sibyl as a Symbol in Virgil's Aeneid

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, Nicole (2003) "Prophecy and Poetry: The Cumaean Sibyl as a Symbol in Virgil's Aeneid," *Ephemeris*: Vol. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/ephemeris/vol4/iss1/10>

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*Prophecy and Poetry:  
The Cumaean Sibyl as a Symbol in Virgil's Aeneid*  
By Nicole Miller

Every detail of art is intentional; an author does not arbitrarily add characters to his work. Everything is chosen with the utmost care in order to facilitate the action, enhance theme, or act as a symbol. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Cumaean Sibyl fulfills each of these roles. Of the twelve books of the Roman epic, the sixth book, which is Aeneas' "consultation of the Cumaean Sibyl, [is] the hinge of the work."<sup>1</sup> As she plays such an important role in the epic, the Sibyl must be more than a facilitator of action. Indeed she enhances the theme and acts as a symbol. Virgil uses and manipulates the myth of the Sibyl in the *Aeneid* to draw parallels between the poet and the prophet and thus define his place in the epic tradition. Virgil loosely bases his depiction of the Sibyl on local myth, but she was quite clearly "his own creation. She is after all (like Aeneas himself), a character in epic and as real or unreal as Helen or Circe."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Sibyl's role is essential to Virgil's explanation of his place in the tradition of epic. Throughout his epic, Virgil echoes the Greek tradition but deviates in the composition of the very work and in the use of a personal voice. The language he chooses to use in reference to the Sibyl and the very fact that he deemphasizes her humanity reveal his intentions in utilizing the Sibyl as a symbol.

To understand the use of the Sibyl as a symbol, it is important to first understand the intrigue and

mystery surrounding her legends. Throughout the ancient world, there were seers and prophets foretelling of the future and acting as pivotal figures in myth. According to the historian Varro, there were ten Sibyls throughout the ancient world. Tradition places these Sibyls throughout Greece and the Greek colonies.<sup>3</sup> Even those oracles in Italy were closely tied to Greece. The city of Cumae, where Virgil's Sibyl resides, was actually a Greek colony. Hence the Cumaean Sibyl was directly linked to the Greek tradition yet uniquely Italian. This placement parallels Virgil's standing in the epic convention. Both are rooted in Greek origins, but claim their own unique place in the tradition. Virgil "deliberately echoed Homer in many details of narrative, in many conventions and features of style."<sup>4</sup> The very shape of the *Aeneid* is the inverse of Homer's series of epics. Virgil places the journeying of the *Odyssey* in the beginning of his epic and the war elements of the *Iliad* in the second half of his epic. Virgil even "gave his poem the Greek title *Aineis*, thus expressly invoking [...] the parent poetry of Greece."<sup>5</sup> Even in the words of the Sibyl, Virgil reminds his audience of the preceding Greek tradition. She sees in the future a "horrida bella"<sup>6</sup> for the Trojans. She foretells an "alius Achilles"<sup>7</sup>, an "hospita coniunx"<sup>8</sup> and an "externi thalami"<sup>9</sup>. Through

<sup>1</sup> H.W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity*, ed. B.C. McGing (New York: Routledge, 1988), 79.

<sup>2</sup> John Pollard, "Virgil and the Sibyl." The Fourteenth Jackson Knight Memorial Lecture. University of Exeter. 29 October 1981, 14.

<sup>3</sup> Parke, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Fitzgerald, postscript to *The Aeneid*, Virgil, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Classics, 1983), 405.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Virgil *Aeneid* 6.87.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.89.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 6.93.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 6.94.

these echoes of the Greek tradition, Virgil recalls the readers mind to the original and directly contrasts it with his own work. In this echo, Virgil reminds the reader that he has manipulated a traditional convention to create a new work of art.

This convention of epic was in fact born from an oral tradition of bards. Scholars agree that, "Homer was a master of and heir to a tradition of oral epic poetry that reached back over many generations, perhaps even centuries."<sup>10</sup> The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were most likely composed by a series of bards over time retelling different versions of the adventures of ancient heroes. In contrast, Virgil's approach to epic was extremely calculated. He transformed a tradition based in bardic lore into a very intentional literary art form. This very approach to epic was a break in tradition and is manifested in the very act of writing. This deviance is also seen in the symbol of the poet—the Sibyl. Tradition has Oracles proclaiming their prophecies while "her babblings were recorded"<sup>11</sup> by attendants. The Cumaean Sibyl is markedly different in her manner of prophecy, by writing on palm fronds. Aeneas begs that "foliis tantum ne carmina manda."<sup>12</sup> Both Virgil and his Sibyl expressed themselves through written language rather than speech. These "written responses which could be drawn like lots were a common institution in Italian shrines."<sup>13</sup> Virgil deliberately chose a sibyl who adhered to a distinctly Italian tradition deviating from the Greek predecessors.

Throughout his epic, Virgil echoes his Greek predecessors but manipulates the tradition. This element of change is introduced in the opening line of the *Aeneid*. In the ancient Greek tradition, the first lines of an epic called upon the Muse to speak through the poet. In the *Iliad* the opening line states, "Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles." The poet continues, "Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed, Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles."<sup>14</sup> Virgil immediately breaks away from this tradition by claiming authorship of his epic. He opens the *Aeneid* with "*Arma virumque cano.*"<sup>15</sup> Virgil does not even mention the Muse until line eight. Even in this acknowledgement, he clings to his role as author. He says "Musa mihi causas memora" l. 8. In this request, he is not asking the Muse to tell the tale as Homer had done, but to speak of it to him so that he may write it. In these crucial opening lines, Virgil is establishing his distinct authorship and role in the creation process. The Sibyl, as a symbol of the poet, also holds a similar role. In fact, Virgil uses language evocative of the opening line as she begins to prophecy, "Bella, horrida bella/ et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno."<sup>16</sup> In giving the Sibyl the ability to see the future herself, Virgil is reiterating the importance and power of the individual in the creation of art. Although the Sibyl is able to see for herself, she cannot do so without the aid of Apollo. Virgil is careful to note that first she must be *adflata*<sup>17</sup>, breathed upon, and thus inspired by the god. "She is inspired by Apollo, but not

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Knox, introduction to *The Iliad* by Homer, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1990), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Pollard, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Virgil, 6.74.

<sup>13</sup> Parke, 83.

<sup>14</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1990), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Virgil, 1.1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.86-7

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.50.



completely possessed by the god."<sup>18</sup> Virgil also acknowledges this spark of inspiration in his address to the Muse in Book I. The very act of creation is holy and inspired by divinity, but not wholly produced by the divine. Virgil carefully defines the roles of inspiration and the author through the illustration of the Sibyl.

To understand the further literary uses of the Sibyl in context of the culture, it is helpful to look to Virgil's contemporaries. The tale of the Sibyl is told in both Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, with strikingly different effects. Ovid emphasizes the humanity and suffering of the shriveling old woman in his *Metamorphoses*. His depiction evokes sympathy for her immense suffering as a result of the folly of youth while downplaying her prophetic abilities. Conversely, Virgil describes the prophetess in inhuman terms. He distances the reader from her by describing her as *nec mortale sonans*<sup>19</sup>. Virgil quite intentionally avoids addressing the origins of the prophetess' powers. In fact he "had based his account on wide and deep reading, but also, as he was living in Naples when he wrote it, he was in immediate touch with the surviving site."<sup>20</sup> This access to information and location reveals that Virgil deliberately chose not to include the Sibyl's history in order to emphasize his own point. In deemphasizing the Sibyl's humanity, Virgil emphasizes her role as symbol in his epic. He highlights each characteristic of hers that parallels his own in order to give a clear explanation of his own art.

The language Virgil uses to describe the sibyl emphasizes the parallels between himself and the character he has written. The most

blatant parallel Virgil draws is through the use of the word *vates*. The Sibyl is constantly referring to as a *vates*, which has a double meaning of both prophet and poet. Tradition states that the Sibyl was not consulted for matters of the future but for advice in dire circumstances and her "responses were not so much predictions referring to the future as directions for meeting present emergencies."<sup>21</sup> Virgil completely contradicts this notion and intentionally changes it to emphasize the Sibyl's role in the creation process. He describes her as *praescia venturi*<sup>22</sup> because she is able to see into the future. Virgil himself is *praescius venturi* because he is constructing the epic. As the author he is the creator and has a deliberate path and point in his epic. Through this choice of wording, Virgil again draws parallels between himself and the prophetess.

As Virgil was *praescius venturi*, he had a great amount of power in choosing what to reveal about his intentions. These obscurities can be very easily compared to the riddles for which the Sibyl was renowned. This vagueness in prophecy insured a greater chance of accuracy, but Virgil chooses to use this as a symbol as well. Virgil describes the Sibyl as *obscuris vera involens*<sup>23</sup>, much like a poet. The many mysteries surrounding the *Aeneid* may in fact not be due to incompleteness, but to Virgil's intentional vagueness. This is most clearly seen in the closing passage of Book VI as Aeneas leaves the underworld through the ivory gate of false dreams. The possibilities of meaning in this are endless. Perhaps Aeneas had simply dreamt the entire journey to the

<sup>18</sup> Parke 79

<sup>19</sup> Virgil, 6.50.

<sup>20</sup> Parke, 79.

<sup>21</sup> Roy Merle Peterson, *The Cults of Campania*, vol. 1, *Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome* (Rome: Accom. Editori Alfieri & Lacroix, 1919), 58.

<sup>22</sup> Virgil, 6.100.

<sup>23</sup> Virgil, 6.100.

underworld. Maybe Aeneas as the symbol of all that was Augustan virtue is simply false and in this the virtue extolled throughout the epic and the golden age of Augustus false as well. Virgil's meaning here is clearly *involens obscuris* and, just as the prophecies of the Sibyl, was most certainly intended to be such.

Virgil delights in these parallels between himself as the poet and the Sibyl as prophetess. Throughout the pivotal Book VI, he continually reminds the reader that this version of the Sibyl is quite intentional. Through his echoes of Greek epic convention and his word choices, he quite clearly defines his place in the ancient tradition. Even though "she is based on the legend of the Sibyl of Cumae, clearly she is more than that."<sup>24</sup> The Sibyl is an integral part of his illustration of the role of the individual in the creation of art and reminds the reader that every detail of art has significance.

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<sup>24</sup> Pollard, 12.