Echoing Voices

Portrayals of the Sibyl in Virgil’s Aeneid and Ovid’s Metamorphoses

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The Cumaean Sibyl

• One of ten distinct Sibyls
• Originally a Greek construction
• Usually portrayed as an old woman
• Received prophetic inspiration, usually under the influence of a god
• Known for the Sibylline Books, a collection of those prophecies

c. 1450
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
http://www.paradoxplace.com/Perspectives/Italian%20Images/Montages/Art/Andrea%20del%20Castagno.htm
Temple of Jupiter Capitoline on the Capitoline Hill
Temple of Apollo on the Palatine Hill
Virgil

- Publius Vergilius Maro
- Born 70 BC near Mantua, Italy
- Spent his formative years under the influence of the Roman Civil War
- Was a country-man who respected the simple virtues and religious traditions of the Italian people
Virgil and Augustan Reform

• After the civil war, Augustus came to power with the promise of a reborn Rome.

• Reforms were political and moral in nature
  o Restoring public monuments and temples
  o Reviving games and festivals
  o Increasing social-class rigidity
  o Revive traditional Roman religion in the state

• Augustus commissioned Virgil to write the Aeneid in 31 BC
Aeneid Book VI

• Set during Aeneas’ journey to the underworld
• Focuses on Aeneas’ journey as he meets his father and future descendants
• The personality traits of the Sibyl exist in order to facilitate Virgil’s praise of Augustus and the new Roman state
  o She is inspired by Apollo
  o Her inspiration is ecstatic and uncontrollable
  o Her words are instructions or prophecy with no personal input

The Sibyl is Inspired by Apollo: *Aeneid* 6.45-51

- ventum erat ad limen, cum virgo, "poscere fata tempus" ait: "deus ecce deus!" cui talia fanti
- ante fores subito non vultus, non color unus,
- non comptae mansere comae, sed pectus anhelum,
- et rabie fera corda tument, maiorque videri
- nec mortale sonans, adflata est numine quando
- iam propiore dei.

- He had come to the threshold when the virgin said: "It is time to demand oracles. The god, behold, the god!" When she said such things
- before the doors, suddenly neither her face nor her color were the same,
- her braided hair did not remain nice, but her breast gasped,
- and a wild heart swelled with madness within her, and she seemed bigger
- and not sounding mortal, she was inspired
- by the ever nearer will of the god.
The Sibyl is Inspired by Apollo: *Aeneid* 6.77-80

- At Phoebi nondum patiens, immanis in antro bacchatur vates, magnum si pectore possit excussisse deum; tanto magis ille fatigat os rabidum, fera corda domans, fingitque premendo.

- But not yet submitting to Phoebus, the wild seer rages in the cave to see if she can shake off the great god from her chest; but all the more, he wears out her raging mouth, taming her wild heart, and molding her through restraint.
Distrust of the Sibyl: 
*Aeneid* 6.74-76

- "foliis tantum ne carmina manda,
ne turbata volent rapidis ludibria ventis;
ipsa canas oro."
- "Only do not hand over your songs to pages,
lest they fly as mockeries mixed up by the fast winds;
I beg that you sing them yourself."
The Sibyl’s Prophecy: *Aeneid* 6.89-90, 93-94

- alius Latio iam partus Achilles,
- natus est ipse dea...

- causa mali tanti coniunx iterum hospita Teucris
- externique iterum thalami.

- A new Achilles has already been born in Latium, himself born of a goddess...
- Once again a foreign wife [will be] the cause of such great evil and a foreign wedding.
Virgil’s Purpose

- Virgil’s portrayal of the Sibyl is filtered through Virgil’s desire to praise Augustan Rome.
- Her presence is a result of the popularity of her religious following during Augustan times.
- Her lack of agency also reflects the social structure of Augustan times.

http://en.museicapitolini.org/collezioni/percorsi_per_sale/pinacoteca_capitolina/sala_di_santa_petronilla_la_grande_pittura_del_seicento_a_roma/sibilla_cumana
Ovid

- Publius Ovidius Naso
- Born March 20, 43 BC in Sulmo
- Lived and wrote under the reign of Augustus
- Banished in 8 AD to Tomis
- Famous for his *Metamorphoses*, completed by 8 AD

http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/a/ovid.htm
Metamorphoses Book XIV

• Set during Aeneas’ journey to the underworld

• The main focus of the book is not on Aeneas, but on the Sibyl

• The depiction of the Sibyl lacks any “underlying moral or patriotic purpose” (Griffin 69).

• In the place of Virgil’s epic tone and interest in Roman politics, Ovid’s text focuses on the personal hardships of both Aeneas and the Sibyl
The Sibyl as a Vulnerable Human: *Metamorphoses* 14.106-9

- But she, filled with prophetic inspiration from the received god, at last lifted up her face which had lingered on the ground for a long time, and said: "You seek great things, you man greatest through your deeds, whose right hand has been tested by the sword, whose piety has been tested by fire."

- "magna petis" dixit, "vir factis maxime, cuius dextera per ferrum, pietas spectata per ignes."
Ovid Vs. Virgil

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• He had come to the threshold when the virgin said: "It is time to demand oracles. The god, behold, the god!" When she said such things before the doors, suddenly neither her face nor her color were the same, her braided hair did not remain nice, but her breast gasped, and a wild heart swelled with madness within her (Aeneid 6.45-49)
The Sibyl Gains Immortality: *Metamorphoses* 14.132-8

- Eternal life without end was offered to me,
- if my virginity had extended itself to Phoebus, my lover.
- While yet he hoped for this, while he wished to bribe me with gifts,
- he said, "Choose, Cumaean virgin, what you desire:
- what you desire you will obtain." I, pointing to a pile of gathered dust,
- vainly asked that so many birthdays be granted to me as
- the pile of dust had particles.
While yet he hoped for this, while he wished to bribe me with gifts, I, pointing to a gathered pile of dust vainly asked that as many birthdays be granted to me as the pile of dust had particles.
The Sibyl’s Regret:
Metamorphoses 14.139, 142-144

• excidit, ut peterem iuvenes quoque protinus annos

• "sed iam felicior aetas
terga dedit, tremuloque gradu venit aegra senectus,
quae patienda diu est...

• I forgot that I should immediately ask for youthful years as well

• "But now my happier days
has turned their backs and feeble old age comes with trembling step,
which must be suffered for a long time..."
The time will come, when the long days will make me small from such a big body, and when my limbs, consumed by age, will be reduced to the smallest weight. I will seem not to have been loved nor to satisfy a god. Phoebus himself will also perhaps either not know me or he will deny he has loved me.

Having been changed, I will be brought so far to be seen by nobody, I will however, be known by my voice, the Fates will leave my voice behind for me.

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tempus erit, cum de tanto me corpore parvam
longa dies faciet, consumptaque membra senecta
ad minimum redigentur onus. nec amata videbor
nec placuisse deo. Phoebus quoque forsitan ipse
vel non cognoscet vel dilexisse negabit;
usque adeo mutata ferar, nullique videnda,
voce tamen noscar, vocem mihi fata relinquent."
Ovid’s Purpose

• The Sibyl’s transformation from a young woman into an old woman represents the theme of change prevalent in the *Metamorphoses*.

• Focusing on the Sibyl’s personal story makes her more relatable to an audience.

• Primarily, Ovid’s use of the Sibyl is meant to entertain his audience.
In Conclusion

- Virgil’s Sibyl is constructed based on the political atmosphere of the poet’s lifetime
- Ovid’s Sibyl, while a response to Virgil’s, is primarily a figure meant to be relatable and entertaining

- Though Ovid’s Sibyl shows the most agency, she remains a tool
- Both authors use basic facts about the Sibyl and twist them to fit their specific literary purpose