

#### XIV. The Sibyl in a Lamp

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Ecce iam vespera lucernam intuens Pamphile: 'quam largus,' inquit, 'imber aderit crastino' et percontanti marito, qui comperisset istud, respondit sibi lucernam praedicere. quod dictum ipsius Milorisi secutus: 'grandem,' inquit, 'istam lucerna <m> Sibyllam pas-cimus, quae cuncta caeli negotia et solem ipsum de specula candelabri contuetur' (*Metamorphoses* 2.11, ed. R. Helm).

Of course Pamphile's forecast of rain is based on her observation that the lampwick is sputtering or that candle-snuff is forming on it.<sup>1</sup> Helm queries *lucernam* (or *lucerna*) in Milo's remark as a possible intrusive gloss, but I submit that its deletion would destroy the point and that the text should rather be emended to read "istam <in> lucerna," assuming precisely the same transcriptional error as in "die quadam <in>timidae illius aniculae sermo talis" (*Met.* 9.16) and "oleo balsam <in>o" (*ibid.* 10.21).<sup>2</sup> Then Milo says: "That's a mighty Sibyl of yours that we're keeping in the lamp." *Pascimus*, literally "feeding," is a word appropriate to the keeping of animals or other pets, but the speaker may be thinking of the Sibyl as nourished by the oil, and he, or rather Apuleius, probably has in mind the belief that she was confined, like a "captive demon" or a "bottle imp," in a flask (*ampulla*, Petronius, *Satyricon* 48) or a round iron cage (*cavea ferrea rotunda*, Lucius Ampelius, *Liber Memorialis* 8.16), reluctantly immortal and much attenuated by age; compare the more rational notion that her bones or mortal remains were kept in some such small receptacle (*phakos*, a lentil-shaped, flattened flask, Ps.-Justin, *Cohortatio ad Graecos* 37; *hydria*, a cinerary urn, Pausanias 10.12.8). Some years ago the late Campbell Bonner discussed these texts, and several others from a late period, in one of his masterly short articles, pointing out their connection with the folklore theme of the bottle imp,<sup>3</sup> but he either

<sup>1</sup> See Aristoph. *Vesp.* 260-3, Verg. *Georg.* 1.390-2, Pliny, *H.N.* 18.357.

<sup>2</sup> F. Walter, *Blätter für das Bayerische Gymnasial-Schulwesen*, 1914, 124-5 (inaccessible, but recorded in *L'Année philologique*), proposed *ista in lucerna*, but *istam in* is easier to justify paleographically and gives an equally satisfactory sense.

<sup>3</sup> "The Sibyl and Bottle Imps," *Quantulacumque: Studies Presented to Kirsopp Lake* (London 1937) 1-8.

overlooked the passage under discussion or, more probably, doubted that it had a definite bearing upon his subject. Yet I believe that we are concerned with the Sibyl herself and not a mere spirit of prophecy, because an ancient lamp often resembled a flattened bottle so closely that Apuleius' lively imagination could readily have made the transition between them, and in fact the familiar tale of Aladdin's Lamp suggests that his conceit may even have developed from a bit of actual lore about a jinni confined in a lamp. A lamp of a specified sort figured prominently in *lychnomanteia*, a form of divination in which the operator evidently induced a state of trance in a boy (a *puer incantatus*) and whispered certain magical formulae to him, whereupon he would utter prophecies in response to the query, "What do you see?" In the course of his trial for the illicit use of magic Apuleius' accusers charged that he had once caused a boy to fall unconscious for this purpose (*Apologia* 42), but that was probably no more than an epileptic seizure. The point of present relevance is that the lamp was believed to afford a dwelling for the prophetic spirit; as Abt explains,<sup>4</sup> "das Licht . . . wird zum Vermittler der Weissagung<sup>5</sup> und Sitz des zukunfts kündenden Gottes aus der naiven Vorstellung heraus, dass, wie es das Dunkel der Nacht erhelle, so auch die düstere Zukunft."<sup>6</sup> After Pamphile has daubed herself with the magic ointment which will soon transform her into an owl, she holds lengthy converse with the lamp (*multumque cum lucerna secreto conlocuta*, *Met.* 3.21), and in the parallel Greek text (Ps.-Lucian, *Asinus* 12) the woman, even before she applies the ointment, places two lumps of incense in the lamp-flame, then addresses (or perhaps she "railed at," *katelalêsen*) the lamp itself. In *lychnomancy* (*PLond.* 121; Abt, *op. cit.* 163) the lamp-wick was kindled with incense, but divination seems out of the question here;<sup>7</sup> perhaps the idea is that a spirit in the lamp somehow assists the magical praxis. All of this seems at least to show that the Sibyl should be regarded as a sprite inhabiting the lamp.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Abt, *Die Apologie des Apuleius von Madaura und die antike Zauberei* (Giessen 1908) 165. See also *RE*, s.v. *Λυχνομαντεία*, 13, cols. 2115-9.

<sup>5</sup> Here Abt cites *Met.* 2.11, without comment.

<sup>6</sup> Abt quotes Artem. *Oniocr.* 2.9, where we read that a dream about a lamp has prophetic meaning.

<sup>7</sup> But Hildebrand, an early editor, wrote: "lucernam allocuta videtur, tamquam oraculum vel Sibyllam," comparing *Met.* 2.11.