

BOOK REVIEW

Divine Mania: Alteration of Consciousness in Ancient Greece by Yulia Ustinova. Routledge, 2018. ISBN 978-0367594268.

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What role did altered states of consciousness play in the life of ancient Greek society? With consummate skill and scholarship, Yulia Ustinova answers this question in her book *Divine Mania: Alteration of Consciousness in Ancient Greece*.

It appears that the secret of the extraordinary creativity of the ancient Greeks was their receptivity to, and approval of, a particular altered state of consciousness they cultivated. *Mania* is the name for this but it must be qualified as “god-given.” *Mania* is a word that touches on a cluster of concepts: madness, ecstasy, and enthusiasm, or *engoddedness*, to use Ustinova’s more vivid coinage.

It seems a paradox that this special, strange, and often quite frightening state of dissociation should be so closely linked to one of the most creative civilizations. Unlike the Roman and Egyptian, the Greek approved and recognized the value of god-inspired mania. Plato makes Socrates say in the *Phaedrus* that through *mania* we may obtain the “greatest blessings.” Whereas resistance to divine ecstasy can end in disaster, as Euripides illustrates in *The Bacchantes* when Pentheus, a repressive authoritarian, tries to inhibit a posse of women from their ecstatic mountain dances. He is torn to shreds by his mother and her maniacal cohorts. This mindset of the ancient Greeks may have long ago petered out, but similar tendencies are constants, expressed in one form or another, throughout history.

The Introduction starts with Socrates in the *Phaedrus* talking

about the blessings of madness. Socrates himself is an illustration of what this book seems to want to underscore. Generally viewed as the archetypal founder of rational dialectic, Socrates yet was periodically prone to ecstatic seizures, as the records make clear. Periodically, he also interacted with a daemonic intelligence, a spirit guide we might say. The author leads us through the texts that tell the story. So, Socrates was a rationalist *and* a spiritualist.

Ustinova makes a crucial point about the difference between Greek and Roman attitudes toward ecstatic cults. The Romans, because of their history and culture, looked askance (rather like the current American empire) on the wildness and unsettling anarchy of mania; however, whenever the Romans, like Americans today, found themselves in more permissive environments, they surrendered to the raptures of divine mania.

Chapter One covers prophetic mania. Divination was widely practiced, even in the lives of generals and statesmen. They believed the gods were the source of supernormal knowledge of the future. The question was how to obtain that knowledge. There were priests who practiced prophecy, and seers, often of no special standing, who became voices of the gods. To access this prophetic knowledge, one must be inspired, radically dissociated from mundane life. A person in such a mental place may appear crazy, manic, maniacal. Another difficulty for common sense, prophetic mania and its effects appear to subvert the common belief that a cause always precedes its effect, but there seem to be exceptions to this once in a while, an anomaly called precognition that turns cause and effect upside-down.

The second chapter examines telestic (ritual) mania and its relationship to the near-death experience. The general idea that seems to emerge: The extraordinary experiences that spontaneously arise during near-death states are similar to, if not identical with, the kinds of transcendent experiences claimed to characterize the ancient mystery rites. Modern near-death research seems not only to help us understand large swaths of religious experience, but also may offer insights on how to consciously induce and study the phenomenon of near-death transformation from the inside, so to speak.

Bakcheia is the title of the next chapter and takes us into the possibly dangerous cult of Dionysus, which is slanted genderwise toward

women. The ambiguity of ecstatic mania is here explored, its creative and destructive powers, its individual and its collective potentials. The author describes the absurd dialectic of Dionysian ecstasy: the maenads (madly inspired women) who surrender to Dionysos and escape all harm and flourish; Pentheus, the male authority figure who resists the ecstasy, is destroyed.

This is the great theme of Euripides' masterpiece, *Bacchae*. Euripides is telling us, writes Ustinova, that "ecstatic states are inherent to human nature and it is sheer folly to suppress them" (p. 197). An important question might be posed: What is the role of ecstasy in the mental health and creative well-being of a given society? Are we an ecstasy-deprived civilization?

The fourth chapter is an exploration of mania on the battlefield. If mania is a state that takes you out of your ordinary self, beyond your ordinary fears, it could make you a star on the battlefield, for it may arouse in you invincible *furor*—maniacal rage. This chapter explores the way the mania that takes you beyond yourself can also blind and destroy you. Divine mania is not easy to control and is always a struggle to be with. The mania that comes from power cannot help straddling between the malign and the benign, forever between bane and boon. The history of crime and tragedy is littered with tales of mania turned baneful.

Chapter 5 is titled "Nympholepsy"—think (for comparison) "narcolepsy," being taken over by sleep. Now think of being taken over by the Nymph Calypso who offers you sexual bliss and immortality. Well, it happened to Odysseus, but he got bored, missed home and family, and had to escape from his enchantment. Nympholepts were alienated from the habitats and routines of city life, lived in solitary and abandoned places, and so were more susceptible to psychic and imaginal forces and seizures, more open to visions and hallucinations of Pan and the nymphs; more prone to mad rage and ecstatic dance. We hear of seizures from Pan. A panolept is taken by a Pan-spawned imaginal form. As with much faery lore, it's hard to avoid seeing some kind of analog with UFO abduction stories. The intriguing gist of this chapter is that certain places or landscapes are conducive to being carried away in mania-induced states of consciousness.

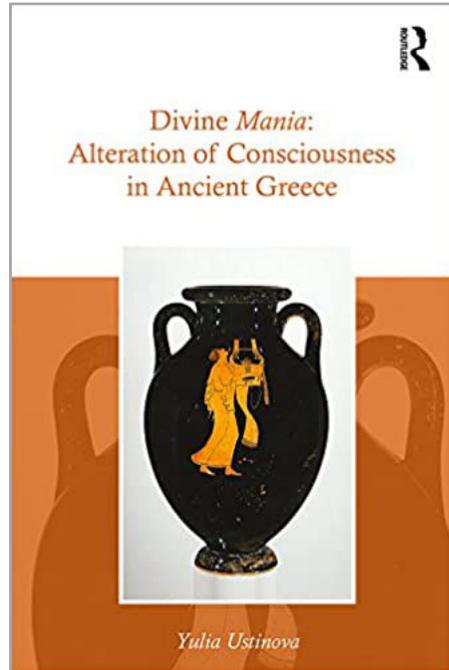
Among the ancient Greeks, mania, or divine inspiration, was the

touchstone of authentic poetry. Plato was emphatic about poetry depending on a state of mind distinct from prosaic rationality. Poetry was linked to oracular and prophetic modes of discourse. The pre-Socratic philosophers Empedocles and Parmenides wrote in poetic styles and traditional meters. Poetry is what happens to language when it is shaped by divine mania. The author details a range of instances that connect inspired use of language with altered states of consciousness, quoting the words of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud: “The idea is to

reach the unknown by the derangement of all the senses.” The senses keep us riveted to blooming, buzzing everyday reality; mania rips our consciousness free and sweeps it away to other worlds of consciousness.

Chapter 7 elucidates the ins and outs of erotic mania, including a lucid discussion of the Platonic philosophy of love. There is a pandemic form of sexual love that culminates in reproduction—sex in service to the species. But there is another form of erotic possibility that sublimates the energies of desire into ecstatic love of beauty wherever found, a transcendent mode of consciousness. Ustinova notes that the word *eros* (as used in the Greek texts) is not just about things sexual; it’s an active force that can and does turn us on to all kinds of things, from the most gross to the most ethereal. *Eros* is a general intensifier of consciousness. A fully erotic life is possible without a trace of sexuality. Likewise, a fully sexual life is possible without a trace of the erotic. It’s nice to see the two come together.

Now the last place we might associate mania with would be the philosophers who are supposed to be friends of sober rationality. And yet it turns out that a certain form of mania flows like a steady



stream through Greek philosophy. Begin with the archaic, borderline-shamanic sages like Epimenides, Aethalides, and Hermetimus; then on to Socrates' daemon and Plato's mystical experiences; and, finally, the pre-Socratic thinkers like Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Parmenides. Mania and altered states are with the philosophers all the time.

The author shows in great detail the uniquely original and creative place of altered states of consciousness in ancient Greek culture. The common thread running through the history of this creativity is a peculiar state of mind—*mania*—a liminal state hovering on the edge that permits an influx of inspiration. Mania is versatile and may assume a form that is prophetic, possessed, bacchic, spiritual, poetic, erotic, musical, iatric, heroic (furor), mystical, and philosophical (and in various combinations). Mania, as I read Ustinova's account, would seem to be a facilitator of all the high forms of creativity that imply an expansion of consciousness into some new path, niche, or channel.

The author opens a new perspective on understanding classical Greek civilization, one that differs from E. R. Dodds' *The Greeks and the Irrational*, also a groundbreaking study of the Greek psyche. She argues that Dodds and other scholars have failed to fully acknowledge how central the reality of mania-induced inspiration was to the higher Greek achievements. The ancient Greeks had the dour Delphi oracle, *nothing in excess*, or a starker oracle—*best of all things is never to have been born; second best is to die young*. But the same people seem to have excelled in raising their consciousness into transcendent modes of being. The paradox of combining unflinching realism with transcendent creativity is notable.

In the Epilogue, Ustinova again calls attention to the historic exceptionalism of the Greeks in their uniquely creative relationship to the psychic syndrome named *mania*. In the end, even ecstasy has to deal with politics. Let the author have the last words:

As a consequence of the absence of priestly authority and lack of ability or desire to interfere on the part of political powers, the Greeks made the most of the alterations of consciousness that many of them experienced, and developed mechanisms that allowed them successful exploitation of these phenomena. (p. 373)